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EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FRENCH COMEDY  
AS A MIRROR OF SOCIAL UNREST

BY

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY  
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EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FRENCH COMEDY  
AS A MIRROR OF SOCIAL UNREST

The Seventeenth Century had been for the most part an age of implicit faith and trust in all existing conditions. With the beginning of the Eighteenth Century there was a strong tendency to over throw the established order and authority that had prevailed in the preceding century.

The decadence of kingly authority began even before the death of Louis XIV. And throughout the reign of Louis XV, who succeeded him, the ruling class gradually lost the respect of the people because of the immorality and extravagance of the court. Royalty was becoming disgraced. The people began to feel that they should have a voice in affairs. They were swinging to the opposite extreme from the time when all order was uncritically accepted. A natural reaction against the restraint of previous rulers was taking place. The corrupt judiciary was losing control over the moral standards and in the church there was constant quarreling. The people were becoming sceptical of the dogmatic doctrines of the church and were withdrawing their support from the established religious institutions. The court of Louis XIV had been composed of impoverished noblemen who used any means to gain wealth; and the means they employed were usually some species of oppression of the lower classes. The nobility lived in luxury on the legitimate possessions of the lower classes. The common people had endured this to the limit





of their patience and from the beginning of the Eighteenth Century became increasingly restless against everything that appertained to authority. Gradually they were gaining their rights.

The bourgeoisie was gaining prominence while the nobility was losing it. And this change had a tremendous influence on literature which in its turn had a reciprocal influence on the social and political status. Instead of writing merely for literature's sake and making a study of the diction in order to produce artistic works, authors used literature as a means - not an end. Polemic literature became more popular and questions of politics, philosophy, economics and religion were discussed. Whereas it had been in the Seventeenth Century a means of demonstration it came now to be an implement of discussion. Men wrote to tear down established order rather than to build it up. Traditional standards of the literature of the preceding age were still respected, but the growth of democracy caused a decided distaste for the aristocratic literature. The spirit of the new literary age displayed an ever growing militant attitude toward the social prejudices, toward intolerance and toward royal authority and its injustices. Literature's chief interest was to propagate new ideas in politics, philosophy, science, sociology, philology and religion. The purpose of the writers was no longer to entertain; it was to instruct. And in order that instructions might reach all, dramas, sermons, satires, letters, pamphlets and all kinds of literature were used. The gradual undermining of power gave men much more liberty in what they wrote. They published things that in the



Seventeenth Century they had not dreamed were possible. The court was no longer the center of literature as it had been. Authors ceased to feel such a great responsibility toward the nobility and turned to the people for support. The salons came to be the center where men of letters discussed the different questions of the age; they had a great part in giving writers an equal standing with the aristocrats of society. And what is more important the salons aided in giving them more freedom in the range of subjects they discussed.

Thus a great change was wrought in French literature. English influence aided this change to a great extent but it will not be discussed in this thesis nor will "Le Theatre de la Foire" which played such an important part; for it, in itself, furnishes material for a thesis.

The unrest which reigned throughout France and the constant effort to instruct and to propagate new ideas were present in comedy in all its forms. Men began to think that the comedy of customs might be a possible activity. Prior to this time they had not dared to depict on the stage any state of society except the doctor, the procurator and characters of similar bourgeois rank or, perhaps, some imitator of the nobility. No one had ventured to paint a courtier or a noble of any rank as he existed. This dearth of true life on the stage proceeded from a lack of naturalness and freedom in expression. There was little portrayal of customs of France; at least in such a way as to open the eyes of the public to the real conditions in society and politics. Scarcely anything had been written to show dissatisfaction with things as they existed.







Molière must be excepted, however, when the above statement is made. He stands apart from any who preceded him or directly followed him and what gives him this place is his philosophy. He saw some of the short-comings and evils which existed in society and did not hesitate to attack them.

"The philosophy of Molière is a sort of naturalism. Almost all his comedies take the part of nature against the prejudices and superstitions which break it. It is in the name of nature that he attacks pedantry, bigotry, that he mocks at prudes and precieuses, that he marries the young girls in spite of their parents to the young people with whom they are smitten." <sup>1</sup> This naturalism is naturalism in society; he gave society first place and attacked whatever hindered its advancement. Molières chief interest lay in depicting contemporary society in reality. But he did not represent individuals, he represented types such as the doctor, the hypocrite, the miser and the affected young girls. He developed his comedies in such a way as to make society see that such characters were a social nuisance. This meant much more to the public because the men and women that he portrayed were types of people which lived in the social world. But this writer of comedies of the Seventeenth Century, in his attacks against society, gave no evidence of the intermingling of classes. "Molières theory is to give pleasure by a realistic or humorously exaggerated

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Pellissier. "Précis de L'Histoire de la Litterature Francaise". p. 218. Paris - N. D.



picture of the weaknesses of mankind."<sup>1</sup> All classes figure in his plays but always in their respective places. He never describes a servant as competing with his master or a bourgeois attempting to fill the place of a noble. Fake nobility has its share of ridicule but never the genuine nobility.

G. Lanson<sup>2</sup> in his discussion on Molière deals with his description of contemporary life and the different types represented in his comedies. He says that every variety of bourgeois is sketched. But he also says, "The financier is only glanced at; the courtier is not seen at the court in the splendor of his servility. If the king is lacking and the priest, one will understand that Molière is not to be reproached for it."<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence of the clashing of any of these classes with one another nor any ridicule of the legitimate nobility. Each class remains in its right place as the vices which exist in society are ridiculed. "Une des études où Molière s'est complu, c'est le ravage que fait le vice dans l'homme, puis hors de l'homme en qui il vit, les destructions ou altérations des sentiments naturels qui en résultent, les longues traînées de misère ou de mal qui le prolongent de tous côtés: et rien n'a donné plus de largeur ni plus de sérieuses portée à ses pièces." <sup>4</sup>

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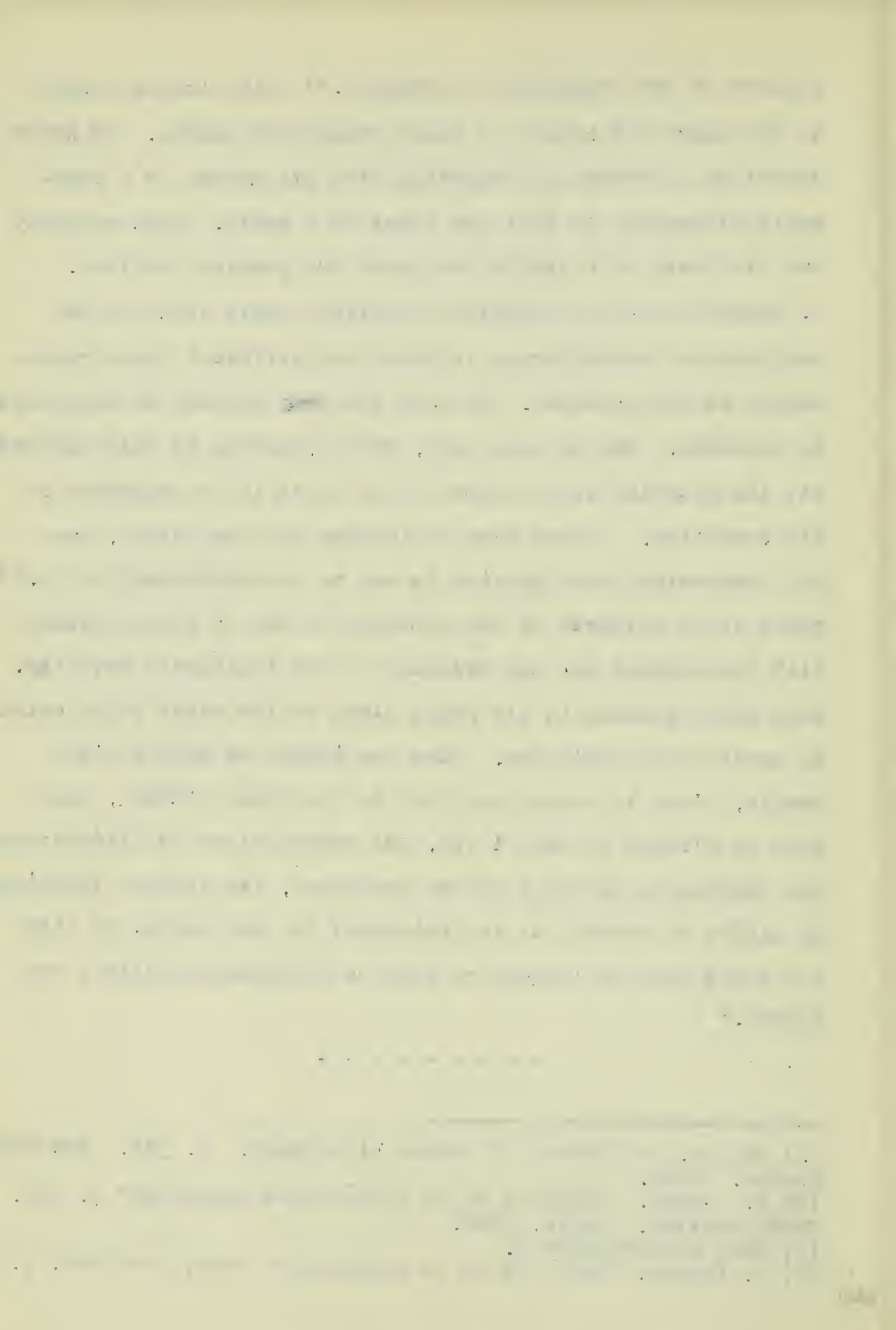
(1) Wright. "A History of French Literature" p. 375. New York - London. 1912.

(2) G. Lanson. "Histoire de la Littérature Française" p. 517. Tenth edition. Paris. 1908.

(3) Same as reference 2.

(4) G. Lanson. "Histoire de la Littérature Française Ibid. p. 525.





Regnard has been accorded first place in the comedy after Molière but to my mind he does not rank with Molière. Although his dates really put him in the Seventeenth Century, Regnard is usually placed in the Eighteenth Century because of his imagination, brilliancy, vigor, gay and lively style and above all because of his ability to visualize the most improbable scene and the one that will produce the most comic effect. But as an instructor of society he belongs in the Seventeenth Century and is on a lower level than Molière although he is a close adherent of Molière and borrows many of his characters, subjects and situations from him. These authors portrayed types which were common in society at that time and both had for their purpose entertainment and pleasure, but Molière went further than this and had for his chief interest instruction, and demonstration of the existing vices through ridicule. Regnard's merit lies in his ability to amuse, and to work out entangling plots; but with no idea whatsoever of bringing about the betterment of conditions. As an example of this we have "Le Joueur" written by Regnard and presented for the first time in 1696. It is a satire on the passion for gambling which reigned in all circles at that time.

Valère, a gambler and a libertine is divided in his love for two sisters. He thinks that he really loves Angelique but in fact he loves nothing except gambling; he lives for it, borrows for it and gambles in spite of his oaths and promises to give it up. When he wins he forgets his



mistress and thinks only of gambling; when he loses he des-  
pairs and comes back to her because he sees the need of making  
a rich marriage. He finally gets very deep in debt and is led  
to pawn the portrait of Angelique. His servant warns him a-  
gainst this and reminds him of his duty to his mistress but  
Valère responds:-

"Tu sais jusqu' où vont mes besoins n' ayant pas  
son portrait l'en aimerai-je moins".<sup>1</sup>

And again when he is out of debt the servant calls  
his attention to his responsibility to Angelique, but still  
Valère disregards his duty and casually remarks:-

"C'est un dépôt."<sup>2</sup>

He is wholly occupied with his gains and can think of  
nothing else.

Valère's neglect of his mistress results at last in  
his losing her. When the father of the gambler expresses his  
delight concerning the engagement of his son to Angelique she  
replies:-

"Autrefois mon coeur eut la faiblesse. De rendre à  
votre fils tendresse four tendresse;

Mais la fureur du jeu dont il est possédé,

Pour mon portrait enfin son lâche procédé,

Me font ouvrir les yeux, et contre mon attente,

En ce moment, monsieur, je me donne à Dorante."<sup>3</sup>

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- (1) "Le Joueur" Act II, Scene XIV.  
(2) "Le Joueur" Act III, Scene VI.  
(3) "Le Joueur" Act V, Scene VIII.



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Thus valère is punished for his sin by losing Angelique but Regnard gives no evidence that the punishment has corrected or changed him. In fact, in the closing speech of the play Valère says:-

"va, va consolons - nous, Hector, et quelque jour  
Le jeu m'acquittera des pertes de L'Amour."<sup>1</sup>

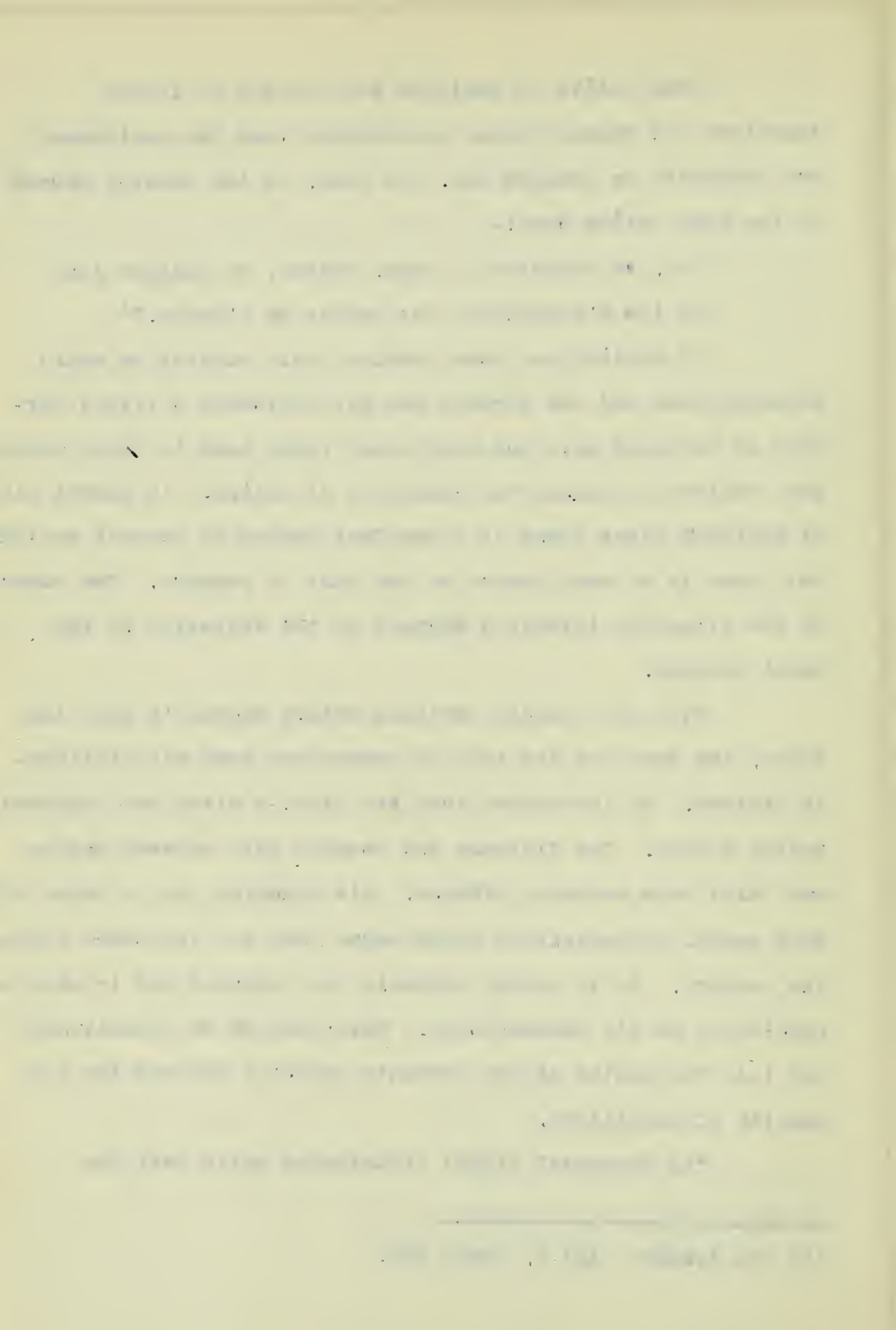
If Molière had been treating this subject he would probably have had the servant use his influence a little further or he would have had some other force come in which would have striven to change the character of valère. In almost all of Molière's plays there is a manifest desire to correct society but there is no such desire on the part of Regnard. The humor of the situation interests Regnard to the exclusion of the moral problem.

With the comedies written before Regnard's time the class, the rank and the tone of characters were all distinctly divided. He introduced into his plays a mixed and confused social status. The distance and respect held between master and valet were becoming effaced. His comedies gave a trace of this social decomposition which began then and increased during the century. It is hardly probable that Regnard had in mind a revolution as did Beaumarchais. Nevertheless he occasionally put into the mouths of the servants protests against the inequality of conditions.

"La Serenade" (1694) illustrates quite well the

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(1) "Le Joueur" Act V, Scene XII.



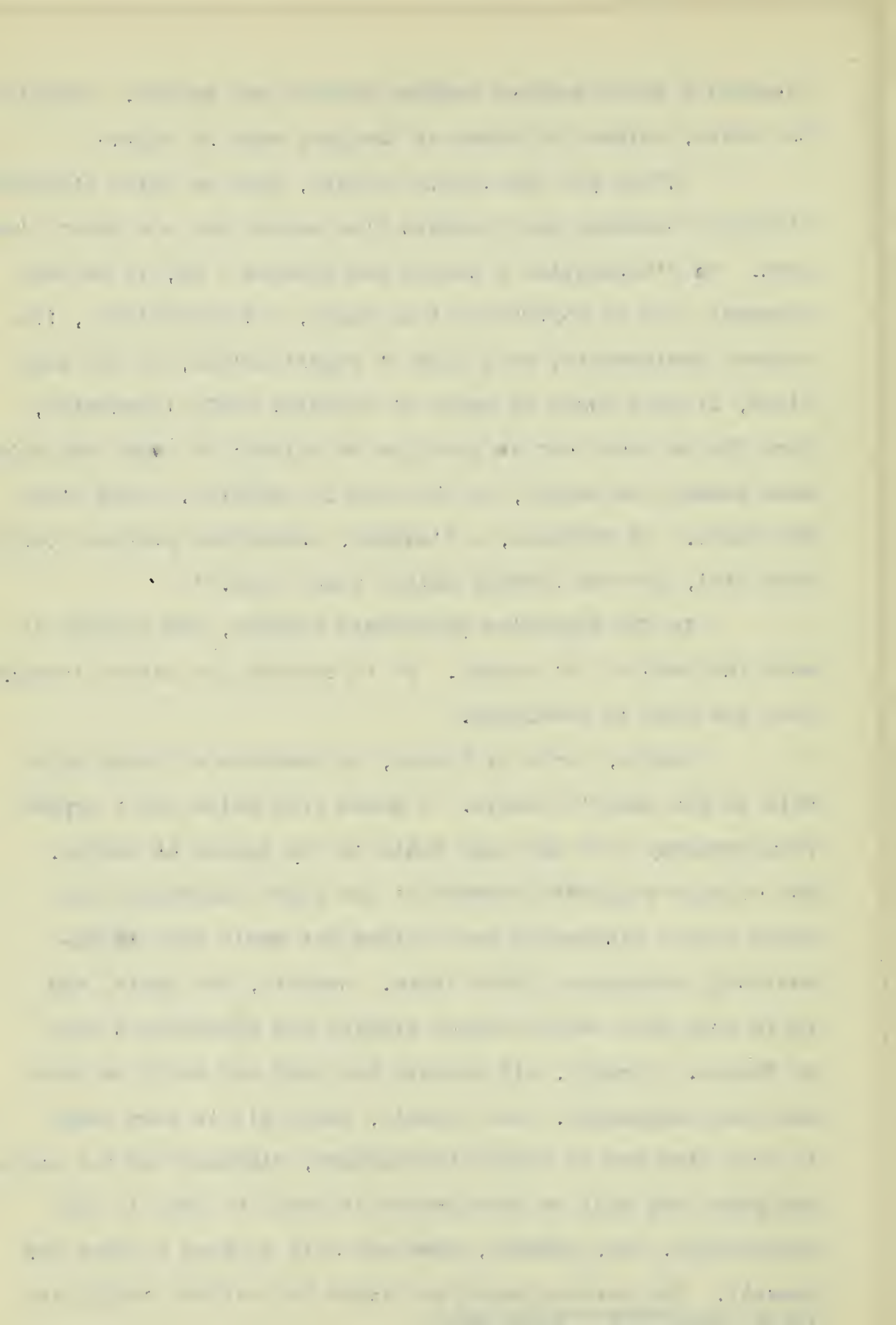
inequality which existed between servant and master. Scrapin, the valet, voices the theme of the play when he says:-

"C'est pas une petite affaire, pour un valet d'honneur, d'avoir a soutenir les intérêts d'un maître qui n'a point d'argent. On s'accouquine à servir ces gredins - là, je ne sais pourquoi; ils ne payent point de gages, ils querellent, ils rossent quelquefois; on a plus d'esprit qu'eux, on les fait vivre, il faut avoir la peine d'inventer mille fourberies, dont ils ne sont tout au plus que de moitié; et avec tout cela nous sommes les valets, et ils sont les maîtres. Cela n'est pas juste. Je prétends, a l'avenir, travailler pour mon compte; ceci fini, je veux devenir maître à mon tour."<sup>1</sup>

In "Le Légataire Universel" Crispin, the servant is made the hero of the comedy. It is through his clever intrigues that the plot is developed.

Eraste, lover of Isabel, is desirous of being sole heir to his uncle's estate. A niece from Maine and a nephew from Normandy have the same claim to the estate as Eraste. But Crispin disguises himself as the niece and nephew and plays such a disgusting part before the uncle that he immediately disregards their claim. Geronte, the uncle, who is in very poor health delays signing his possessions over to Eraste. Finally, all believe him dead and still no heir has been designated. But Crispin, whose wit is ever ready to help them out of their difficulties, disguises as the uncle and makes the will so that Eraste is made the heir to the possessions. He, however, does not fail to keep a share for himself. The servant could not write but neither could his

(1) "La Serenade." Scene XII.





master so he was successful in making the same signature as the uncle would have made: -- a servant placed on the same mental footing as his master.

In "Le Retour Imprevu" the servant again is relied upon to solve the problem. He has a much more important role, so far as development of plot is concerned, than has his master. It is the servant's clever ideas and wit which conceal from the father, for a while, the truth concerning the devastated state to which the son has brought his possessions during the father's journey. Regnard always gives the role of carrying out plans, though wit and cleverness, to the domestic. In "Les Ménechmes" as well as in many other of Regnard's comedies, the important role is taken by a servant. Regnard, however, is not the first to give servants this distinction. Molière before him had permitted them to figure in the chief roles of some of his comedies.

Money and marriage singly and in their relations to each other had a very important place in the society of this period of transition. The lower classes had submitted to their lot during the preceding century, but now since they were gaining freedom they wanted it all at once and wanted to step right into the places that had been held by the aristocrats. Money and the marrying of a title were two things that would give them their desired prestige. Since Regnard's plays describe contemporary life, these elements must necessarily be a large factor in their composition.



In "Le Légataire Universal", which has already been mentioned, Regnard quite clearly shows this scramble for wealth. In this play the plot revolves around a crowd of dishonest people who are scheming to get an old man's money. Again, in "Le Distrain" Le Chevelier is quite anxious that his sister be sent to a convent in order that he may be sole heir to his uncle's property.

Le Question d'argent all through Regnard's works plays a big part in the marriage question -- it serves as the basis for the greater part of his intrigues. During the Eighteenth Century marriage vows were held in very little reverence and Regnard, in most cases, showed marriage as it existed. In "Les Menechmes" (1705) Finette, the servant - and it is usually the servant who sees these questions of the day from an unprejudiced viewpoint - says:-

"Est - ce donc pour s'aimer qu 'on é'pouse à present? Cela fut von du temps du monde adolescent: Et j 'en vois tous les jours qui ne font pas un crime. D' épouser sans amour et meme sans estime. Il faut se marier:"<sup>1</sup> and Valentine, valet of the Chevelier says:-

"Sur cet engagement bannissez votre crainte. Bon! si l' on épousait autant qu 'on le promet, on se marierait plus que la loi ne permet."<sup>2</sup>

Another interesting case where Regnard shows the disrespect for marriage vows is in "Le Divorce" (1688). The main theme of this play is voiced when Colombine, Isabelle's maid, says:-

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(1) "Les Menechmes" Act V, Scene I.  
 (2) "Les Menechmes" Act II, Scene I.





"En effet, messieurs, une femme qui épouse un viellard, dans l'espérance de l'enterrer six mois apres, n'est-elle pas en droit de lui demander raison de son retardement; et n'est-elle pas bien fondée a faire rompre son mariage, puisque son mari n'a pas satisfait a l'article le plus essentiel du contrat, par lequel il s'est obligé tacitement à ne pas passer l'année?"<sup>1</sup>

However, Regnard gives a few instances of true love, instead of money, as a basis for marriage. In "Les Folies Amoureuses" Regnard shows that Eraste loves Agathe not for her money, but for herself alone. In Act I, Scene VIII he says:-

"Agathe, en mariage

A trente mille écus de von bien en partage  
Quand elle n'aurait rien, je l'aime cent  
fois mieux,

Qu'une autre avec tout l'or qui

sediurait tes yeux."

In Act II, Scene X, he says:

"La, bravant du jaloux le dépit et la rage,  
Nous disposerons tout pour notre mariage  
La joie et le plaisir régnent dans ce sejour,  
Et nous y conduirons et l'Hymen et l'Amour."

This is the only reference noted where Regnard consciously advocates love instead of rank or money as a basis for marriage. He illustrates the current idea of marriage and money without trying to bring about a reform.

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(1) "Le Divorce" Act III, Scene VI.



Regnard always manages to have things turn out well for those who are involved in money and marriage intrigues. In "Le Légataire Universel" all those who are trying to get the uncle's money obtain what they want and are satisfied. In "Les Ménéchmes" the entire play is devoted to underhanded plotting to obtain money and a wife. Here again two scheming brothers receive equal shares of money and each marries according to his desire. "Le Retour Imprévu" illustrates the same point where the son who has treacherously done away with his father's possessions during his absence marries the girl he wants and receives a dowry.

In Scene XXIII *Géronte*, the father, says in reply to his son who asks his forgiveness and his consent to his marriage with *Lucile*. "Ah! malheureux! Mais - qu'on me rende mon argent, je me sens assez d'humeur à consentir à ce que vous voulez: c'est le moyen de vous empêcher de faire pis.

Although Regnard represented a decline, after the time of *Molière*, in the struggle to sketch contemporary life in a way that would instruct society, he gave a true picture of some of the existing conditions and has been the first to show the intermixing of classes.

"Regnard is not a contemplator, a silent and pensive observer, like *Molière*, searching the abysses of human nature. He paints the exterior physiognomy and the customs rather than the soul."<sup>1</sup>

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(1) Lenient. La Comédie en France. Au XVIII. Siècle vol. I pp. 19,20. Paris, 1888.





"The moral object which seems to have been the last ambition of Moliere in "Le Tartuffe," "Le Misanthrope", and many of his other works has never entered into the plan of Regnard."<sup>1</sup>

Le Sage (1668-1747) another writer of comedies who depicts contemporary conditions produces a comedy more like that of Moliere than did any of the other writers of the early part of the Eighteenth Century.

"Depuis Moliere et avant Beaumarchais nul n'a mieux que lui su créer des types durables."<sup>2</sup> His merit lies in his spirit of observation, his knowledge of society and his ability to depict types of characters which live.

Turcaret (1709) is considered his best Comedy. It is a comedy of circumstances, a psychological study of society and a tableau of contemporary customs. It is quite probable that Le Sage did not write this play with the purpose of effecting a reform; nevertheless it attacks the "traitants", farmers of the kings revenue, who hoard up great fortunes at the expense of the lower classes. Turcaret, a character from the bourgeoisie, and a coarse and crude fellow is portrayed as a rascal who has become wealthy simply because he was in a place where he could suppress the peasants and take their money.

The fact that the financiers strongly opposed the presentation of "Turcaret" on the stage is evidence of its

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(1) Lenient. "La Comedie en France". Au XVIII. Siecle. Vol. I pp. 19, 20. Paris. 1888.

(2) Lenient. "La Comedie en France". Au XVIII. Siecle. Vol. I p. 130. Paris. 1888.



effect on society at that time.

Le Sage also shows, in this play, the struggle for a greater democracy by disregarding class distinctions and permitting a valet, who is competing with people of higher rank, to be successful.

By producing the above mentioned elements in his play Le Sage won an important place among the comedy writers of the early Eighteenth Century. He shows the greed for money and the discontent with social conditions, which existed then.

Dancourt (1661-1725) wrote at the same time as Regnard but did his best works after him. He was more satirical and wrote with the idea of attacking society while Regnard wrote with the idea of describing the customs in such a way as to entertain the public. Dancourt portrays the characters and customs of the populace rather than those of exclusive society. He deals with the bourgeoisie, and barons and chevaliers who have lost their rank because of indebtedness. The bourgeoisie element dominates in all his works. His plays show that the distinction between classes so exactly observed in Molières time is more and more becoming effaced and that money is the great leveler and the great evil which is making one descend and the other rise. Dancourt, therefore, marks a distinct step toward a larger democracy.

Dancourt's "Bourgeoises de qualité" is valuable because it shows the prevailing craze of the lower class for fortune. The plot centers around a number of characters whose





chief concern is that of marrying for money and obtaining a title. The wife of the procurator, who apes high society and La Greffière whose only aim in life is to marry money and a title are strongly ridiculed. La Greffière expresses the sentiment of the play when she voices her ideas concerning her marriage. "Je l' épouse ce soir, plus par vanité que par amour, moins pour son mérite que pour sa qualité; car je ne veux qu' un nom, c'est ma grade folie."<sup>1</sup> She refers here to the Count whom she would marry in order that she might be "La Comtesse" although she knows that he loves her niece, Angélique. He has given up Angélique in order to marry La Greffière who has money. Love means nothing to him when it is compared to money. However, in the end the money and titles are so distributed that he is allowed to marry Angélique. La Greffière gets her title by marrying M. Naquart, a procurator, who buys a title. As in the plays of Regnard every one is made happy in the conclusion - but there is no rebuke for their frivolous and idle thoughts. M. Naquart represents a man of progress who is wholly in sympathy with the new social standards. His attitude is expressed when he says "Ne voudriez-vous point supprimer les mouchoirs, parce qu autrefois on se mouchait sur la manche?"<sup>2</sup>

M. Blandineau, another procurator is put in contrast with him and endeavors to uphold the old order. He is very

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(1) "Bourgeoises de Qualite" Act II, Scene VII.

(2) "Bourgeoises de Qualite" Act I, Scene II.



much opposed to his wife's extravagance and to the idea of a simple procurator living beyond his means. He is not able to resist the new order, though, and eventually succumbs to his wife's whims and sells his property in order to buy the "Marquisat de Boistortu" so they may be titled.

The comedy ends by a chorus of peasants coming to greet the birth of a new century and singing:-

"Célébrons l' heureuse Greffière,  
qui, lorsque le siècle prend fin,  
Se fait, pour le siècle prochain,  
Comtesse de la Narquardière."<sup>1</sup>

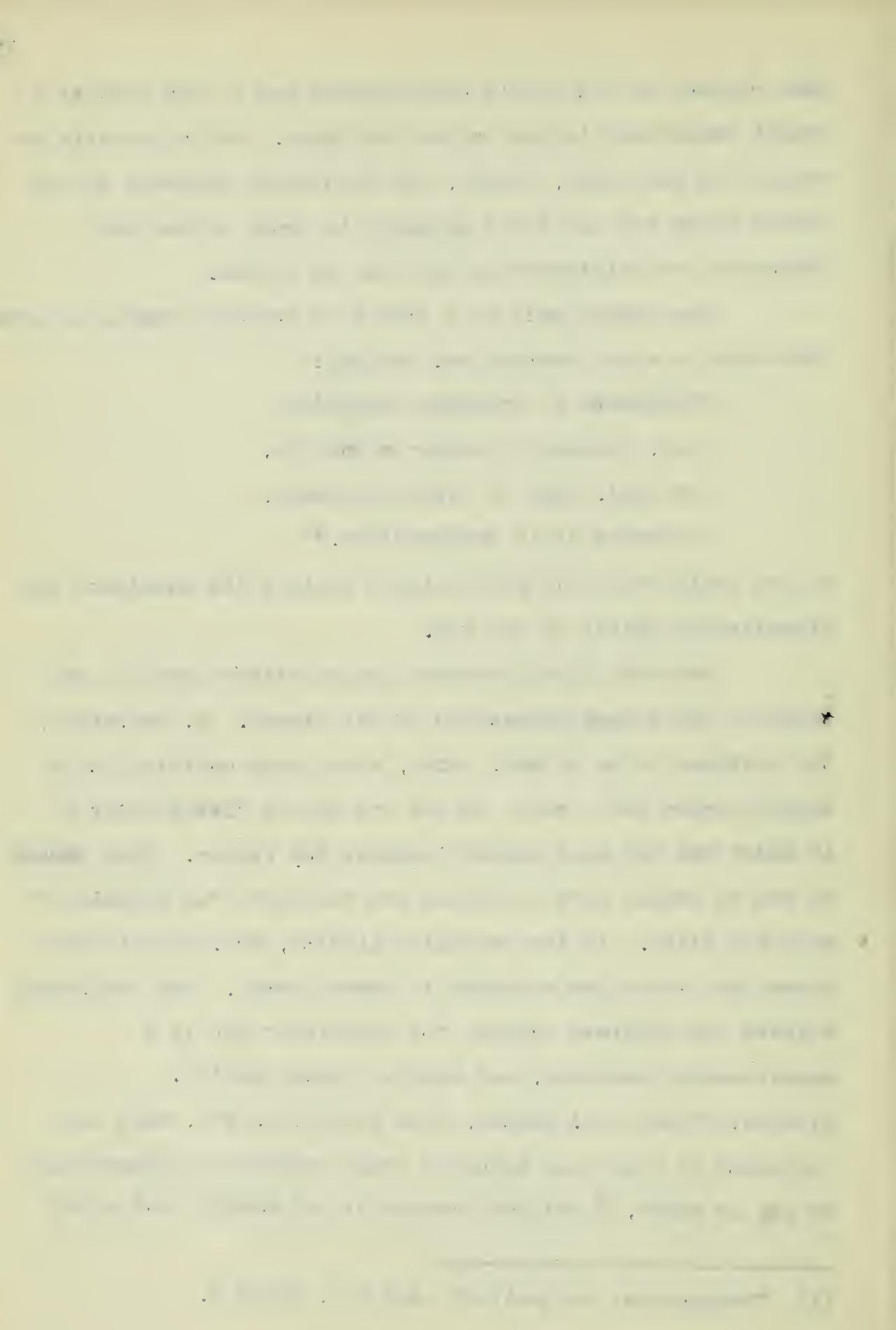
No one could read this play without feeling the unsettled and dissatisfied spirit of the age.

Dancourt often portrays people without rank as the sensible and strong characters of his dramas. M. Serrefort, the brother-in-law of Mme. Patin, whose only ambition is to obtain renown and a name, is the one man in "Le Chevalier à la Mode" who has good common judgment and reason. Even though he has no social rank he stands out far above "Le Chevalier" with his title. In the same play Lisette, Mme. Patin's maid towers far above her mistress in common sense. She frequently advises her mistress against "Le Chevalier" who is a questionable character, and against false quality.

Lisette:- "Bon, bon! Madame, vous seriez, ma foi, bien embarrassée si vous vous trouviez comme certaines grandes dames de par le monde, à qui tout manque et qui malgré leur grand

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(1) "Bourgeoises de qualite" Act III, Scene X.





It deals with the mother who fails to be a confident of her daughter. The mother, Olimpe, plans for her daughter, Angélique, a marriage with a man sixty-four years old because he has money. Angélique, who has spent her life in a convent is rather reserved and fears to refuse her mother's will. She finally confesses her hatred for Danis, the man whom her mother has chosen for her, and her love for another. And eventually things work out in her favor. The chief thing to be noted in this play is the fact that the servant gives more guidance and help to Angélique than her own mother.

Dancourt's comedies have shown a little advance over those of Regnard in depicting to a slightly greater degree the intermingling of classes. He ventures to show more of the lower class in competition with people of rank and station. And his satirical attitude in describing the contemporary customs brings out much more forcibly the discontent and unrest which was ever present. Dancourt has introduced into comedy the people - the customs and tastes of the populace; this marks a great step in the development of the comedy of the Eighteenth Century

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Regnard and Dancourt with Dufresny and Le Sage constitute the vanguard of the Eighteenth Century. They form the transition from Molière to the comedy writers of the succeeding century. The first two mentioned belong to the Seventeenth Century and as moral teachers and character portrayals are on a plane below Molière. They, however, do



nom ne sont connues que par un grand nombre de creanciers, qui crient a leurs portes depuis le matin jusqu' au soir."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that such people are given prominent places shows an increase in the freedom that literary men are taking and also an advancement in the social transformation which takes place in the Eighteenth Century.

Dancourt even permits the mixing of social classes to the extent of portraying the daughter of a washwoman trying to pose as a countess. This is found in "Le Moulin de Javelle". And in "Les Vendanges de Suresne" the servant is granted the right of a strong protest against the oppressions of his master.

"Allez, allez, allez, Monsieur, et laissez - moi faire. Je ne sais ce que ça vent dire, mais il m'est avis que j'ai plus d'esprit que Monsieur Thomasseau (his master). Oh! pour ça, oui, j'ai meilleur jugement. Je ne suis pourtant qu'un paysan; mais il y a vingt ans que je le sers et que je me moque de li, et il ne m'en feroit morque pas accroire seulement un quart d' heure."<sup>2</sup>

Along with the satire against the foolhardy struggle of the lower classes for rank and money, Dancourt did not hesitate to strike at the irreverence in which the marriage vow was held. As has been said in connection with Regnard, there was no time when marriage relations were so little respected. "Les Bourgeoises de Qualite" tells how the count,

{1} "Le Chevalier à la Mode" Act I, Scene III.  
 {2} "Les Vendanges de Suresne" Scene I.





who loves Angélique, has no scruples against marrying her aunt, because she has money, in hope that she will soon die so that he can come back to Angélique.

Character after character whose chief aim in marrying is a financial betterment for themselves figure in his plays. M. Robinet, in "Colin - Maillard" expresses his intention of marrying Angélique, even against her will, for mercenary reasons. And Claudine accepts Eraste, even though she loves another, because he gives her money and diamonds.<sup>2</sup>

Clitandre in "Les Vendanges de Suresne" says that he loves Marianne but he also sees that his marriage with her will settle some of the financial difficulties of his family. Dancourt puts such characters as the ones mentioned above to ridicule but he gives little or nothing to show what he considers the ideal attitude toward marriage.

It had been the custom in France for parents to make the marriage contracts for their children but in the Eighteenth Century the young people began to rebel against this practice, and all kinds of schemes were used to avoid these contracts. Molière had already given a large place to attacks upon parents who try to marry off their children selfishly and who thereby fail to recognize the natural claim of true love.

"La Parisienne" deals with a phase of this subject and is especially interesting because the same theme is treated later by Marivaux and shows quite a development.

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- (1) "Colin - Maillard" Scene IV.  
 (2) "Colin - Maillard" Scene XII.



show the beginning of the confused relationships between classes. But their chief aim in writing comedies was to please. The people in this sceptical age - an age of unrest and confusion - were not long satisfied with this type of literature. And writers began to substitute, for the frank irony of Molière and his immediate successors, a minute study of the customs of society for the purpose of moralizing rather than entertaining. After Regnard and Dancourt, Destouches soon succeeds. He says:-

"J' ai toujours eu pour maxime incontestable, que, quelque amusante que puisse être une comédie, c'est un ouvrage imparfait et même dangereux, si l' auteur ne s' y propose pas de corriger les mœurs, de tomber sur le ridicule, de décrier le vice, et de mettre la vertu dans un si beau jour, qu' elle s' attire l' estime et la vénération publique."<sup>1</sup> This is taken from the preface to "Le Glorieux" and is quite in harmony with the play.

"Le Glorieux" (1732) is an attack against a haughty, vain-glorious character, Le Comte de Tuffière, whose father although of noble birth and high station had lost his fortune. This overbearing count, the "Boaster" refuses to recognize his father who is now "déclassé" on account of his poverty. He tries to appear wealthy and flaunts his noble birth in the face of everyone. Pasquin, the count's

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(1) Preface to "Le Glorieux".





valet gives a good description of his character.

"Sa politique

Est d' être toujours grave avec un domestique.  
S' il lui disoit un mot, il croiroit s'abaisser;  
Et qu' un valet lui parle, il se fera chasser.  
Enfin, pour ébaucher en deux mots sa peinture,  
C'est l' homme le plus vain qu' ait produit  
la nature.

Pour ses inférieurs plein d'un mépris choquant,  
Avec ses égaux même il prend l' air important.  
Si fier de ses aïeux, si fier de sa noblesse,  
Qu'il croit être ici-bas le seul de son espèce.  
Persuadé d' ailleurs de son habileté,  
Et décidant sur tout avec autorité.  
Se croyant en tout genre un mérite suprême;  
Dédaignant tout le monde, et s' admirant lui-même.  
En un mot, des mortels le plus impérieux,  
Et le plus suffisant, et le plus glorieux."<sup>1</sup>

The "Boaster" is in love with Isabel, the daughter of a rich bourgeois who has recently secured the title of a noble. He loves her more for her money than herself because money is the only thing he lacks. He has every thing else to give him the prestige he desires.

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(1) "Le Glorieux" Act I, Scene IV.



Destouches puts Philinte, the Boaster's rival for the hand of Isabel, in direct antithesis to him. He is a character as extravagant in his humility as is the Count in his boastfulness. Philinte even humbles himself before servants and addresses them as monsieur. He does not acknowledge his illustrious birth and great fortune.

"Son faste,

Sa fierté, ses hauteurs, font un parfait contraste  
Avec les qualités de son humble rival,  
Qui n' oseroit parler de peur de parler mal;  
Qui par timidité rougit comme une fille,  
Et qui, quoique fort riche et de noble famille,  
Toujours rampant, craintif et toujours concerté,  
Prodigue les excès de sa civilité".<sup>1</sup>

Neither Regnard nor Dancourt were bold enough to represent such humiliation of nobility before servants.

Lisette, Isabel's maid, has an important part in this play. She represents a new type of servant - one of noble birth but "déclassée" on account of some reverse in fortune. The introduction of this type of character is another illustration of the gradual equalizing of social ranks, forming the antithesis to the fact that some characters of the lower classes were gaining a place in literature. Although Lisette's noble birth is not known, she is held in very high

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(1) "Le Glorieux" Act I, Scene IV.





respect by the family which she serves. Isabel is on very intimate terms with her and insists that the vain-glorious count recognize her excellence.

Lisimon, the enriched bourgeois, offers his heart and possessions to Lisette but Destouches cleverly gives her sense and wit enough to crush such an idea.

"Je ne puis accepter vos propositions,  
Monsieur, sans consulter une très-bonne Dame,  
Que j' honore.----- Madame votre femme."

"Apprenez, je vous prie, à connoître vos gens.  
Un coeur tel que le mien méprise les richesses,  
Quand il faut les gagner par de telles bassesses."<sup>1</sup>

But it is Valère, Lisimon's son, who truly loves Lisette. Notwithstanding the fact that he thinks she is a servant girl he wants to marry her and would do so if he could get the consent of his father. It is the return of the Count's impoverished father which ultimately brings this consent. He reveals the fact that Lisette is his daughter, a sister of Le Comte de Tuffière. This settles the question of her birth and rank and Valère is granted the privilege of marrying her. Destouches could not have Valère marry Lisette before they discovered that they were of equal rank; he did venture though, to make them disregard inequality of rank but convention would not yet endure this.

Voltaire in "Nanine" ou "Le Préjugé Vaincu" (1749)

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(1) "Le Glorieux" Act I, Scene VI.



actually permitted a man of noble rank to marry, with the consent of his noble mother, a girl who was the maid in his home. This play belongs rather in the development of the "Comédie Larmoyante" which is discussed later. But it also has a place here.

The return of the Count's father and the discovery that Lisette is his sister brings the Count to repentance. Destouches could have brought out a much more forceful lesson if he had left the Count to suffer for his sins, but instead he is assured of his fortune and also is given Isabel. Unlike Regnard and Dancourt, Destouches brings the arrogant Count to renounce his boastfulness, thus he instructs society. In the last speech of the play the count tells of his ambitions for a different kind of a life:-

"Je n'aspire plus qu'à triompher de moi,  
Du respect, de l'amour, je veux suivre la loi.  
Ils m'ont ouvert les yeux; qu'ils m'aident à  
ma vaincre  
Il faut se faire aimer; on vient de m'en  
convaincre;  
Et je sens que la gloire et la présomption  
N'attirent que la haine et l'indignation."

This play brings before the public the shortcomings of a boastful, vain-glorious character and shows an extraordinary amount of intimacy of servant with master.

In the fashionable circles of the Eighteenth Century it was thought by most people that a man had very





slight moral obligations to the woman he had married. And egotistical philosophers seeing in marriage a servitude denounced it as a weakness in those who participated in it. Destouches advances a rather hazardous opposition to this prejudice against legitimate and happy marriages. In his "Le Philosophe Marié" (1727) he pictures Ariste, the Philosopher as a victim and dupe of this prejudice which does not permit him to be happy in confessing his legitimate union with a wife whom he loves. His philosophic respect forces him to remain an ostensible bachelor in order not to degrade his principles and in order not to refute the statements he has so often propounded against marriage. This philosopher lacks philosophy. He who has been so forceful in advocating independence is a slave to a prejudice. Although an exponent of the truth he dares not tell it. Ariste loves his wife, who is above reproach in her loyalty to him, very deeply. Yet he exposes her to all sorts of evil suspicions because he wishes to appear consistent in his principle. Destouches aired a rather new and audacious theme in satirizing the tendency to conceal the love one has for his wife and in showing the inconsistency of philosophers.

Destouches showed an advance over his predecessors by developing his comedies in such a way that they instructed society as well as entertained it. Those who preceded him dealt with characters - usually scoundrels - and conditions which were common in that day, but he is the first to treat them with the purpose of bringing about a reform.



marriage of Sylvie and Dorante but Sylvie, contrary to custom, demands the right to know Dorante before accepting him in marriage. The fathers consent to this. For the meeting which is granted her with Dorante she decides to let her maid take her place while she plays the part of the maid. Not knowing that Dorante has planned the same ruse they meet and are surprised to find that the servants as substitutes eclipse to a great extent their master and mistress. In the end Dorante still thinking that Sylvie is the maid offers her his hand in marriage. Sylvie has become aware of his disguise and accepts.

This play is an attack against marrying for money and rank. The fact that Sylvie insists upon knowing Dorante is an incipient reaction against the practice of parent-made contracts for marriage. Dorante's acceptance of Sylvie when he thinks she is only a servant girl is an expression of the desire for equality among the different classes.

"Le Préjugé Vaincu" (1746) belongs to Marivaux's "Comedies de Moeurs". He sees the evils of a prejudice which places one born in the nobility - regardless of his character or mental qualities - above a man of real worth and stability but who has no rank. He depicts Angélique, a young girl, as a victim of this vanity which makes her look upon the lower class with profound disgust. She is vain and haughty and exceedingly proud of her superior rank. Her father, a noble but a wise and democratic man desires that his daughter marry Dorante, the son of his friend who has rendered him useful service. The father realizes the value of a man with an upright





There was not a great barrier of separation between Destouches and Marivaux although with Marivaux comedy did enter into a new period. They were contemporaneous and both treated existing customs and conditions with a moral lesson in view. But Marivaux did more. He introduced the comedy of analysis. His ability to observe and to study the men and women, he puts into his plays, minutely was the secret of his success. His aim in character portrayal is well expressed by Larroumet<sup>1</sup> when he says that Marivaux represents, under true colors, the world in which he lives and makes it act and speak in exact reproduction of its language and actions. He detests imitation so puts on the stage characters that have never been seen there before. He likes to describe the society where love is the important motive, where it is refined and courteous in its rivalry. Love which has ever been a prominent feature in the comedy is the dominant element in Marivaux's characters. And much of his success in depicting the different phases of love is due to the fact that there was never a time when love was more unprincipled and promiscuous than in the Eighteenth Century.

"Le Jeu de l' Amour et du Hasard" (1730) is one of his plays which, according to Larroumet's classification belongs to those showing "Les Surprises de l' Amour." Here he presents to us a little love intrigue in which master and valet are both associated. The fathers have arranged for the

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(1) Larroumet. "Marivaux sa Vie et ses Oeuvres". "Nouvelle Edition". Paris. 1894.



character like that of Dorante but Angélique, although she loves him, is horrified at the idea of marrying a man without rank or title.

It is by bringing Angélique to see that the other qualities of Dorante are far more important than noble birth that Marivaux brings his lesson to the public. When her father finally offers her younger sister to Dorante she begins to see that she doesn't want to be separated from him and her pride is conquered by love.

"La Mère Confidente" (1735) by Marivaux may be classified as a drame bourgeois and marks a transition to the theater of La Chaussée. It contains a very well proportioned mixture of comic with sentiment and moral instruction which is one of the requisites of the drame bourgeois. "Alone with Sedaine, in the Eighteenth Century Marivaux succeeded in making a drame bourgeois simple and true."<sup>1</sup> Larroumet was speaking of "La Mère Confidente". It is the story of a young girl trying to suppress a genuine, whole-hearted love that she has for Dorante, an honest and upright young man, because he has no fortune. Thus far the plot corresponds to the one just discussed but in this play Marivaux uses this situation to point out the duties of a mother toward a daughter who needs the help and advice of an older person.

Angélique has met Dorante while walking in the garden and has permitted him to engage in conversation with her.

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(1) Larroumet. "Marivaux sa vie et ses Oeuvres" Ibid. p. 276.





She realizes that this is contrary to the conventions observed by girls of her rank; and therefore sends him away from her only to call him back and finally to cause him to suggest an elopement.

The mother, Mme. Argante is awakened to Angèlique's love for Dorante; in fact she realizes it so thoroughly that she does not insist upon her daughter's marriage with the rich young noble whom she has selected for her. She feels her duty in directing Angèlique's thoughts and actions but is very tactful about approaching her or accusing her of any ruse that she may be planning in order to be with Dorante. Finally by sympathizing with her interests the mother brings Angèlique to confide all in her. Mme. Argante promises to advise and help her as a friend not as a mother who would demand that her daughter obey her.

Angèlique: - "Mais mon ami redira tout à ma mère; l' une est inseparable d l' autre"<sup>1</sup>

Mme. Argante:- "Et bien! je les sépare, moi; je t'en fais serment. Oui, mets toi dans l' esprit que ce que tu me confieras sur ce pied-la', c'est comme si ta mere ne l' entendait pas, Eh! mais, cela se doit; il y aurait même de la mauvaise for à faire autrement." <sup>1</sup>

The mother's sympathetic understanding leads Angèlique to act much more wisely and leads the mother, herself, to offer Angèlique to Dorante in marriage regardless of his pecuniary circumstances. This is another instance where a prejudice against the inequality of rank is overcome.

(1) "La Mere Confidente". Act III, Scene XII.



Mme. Argante: - "J' accorde ma fille à Dorante que vous voyez. Il n'est pas riche, mais il vient de me montrer un caractère que me charme, et qui fera le bonheur d' Angélique."<sup>1</sup>

"La Mère Confidente" contains the two main elements of the drame bourgeois:- it deals with the serious elements in life and with the bourgeoisie. Therefore it may be considered a forerunner of the "Genre" of which La Chaussée is accorded the place of founder.

Marivaux thus bridges the gap between the old form of play which instructed society by ridiculing its vices and which dealt with the scoundrels of society, and the new form which felt that man, by nature, was good and brought out his best qualities by appealing to his emotions and instincts.

La Chaussée is the first to bring the new type of drama, mentioned above, into favor. In his endeavor to picture life, he mixed the comic and tragic elements with a new and surprising result. It was the reverse of ordinary tragedy in that it described everyday characters, and the reverse of ordinary comedy in that it brought out the beautiful instead of the ugly side of plebeian life. It pictured the faithful friend, the good father, and the devoted mother. Such dramas were called "Comédies Larmoyante's" Later the names "Tragédie Bourgeoise" and "Comédie Sérieuse" were applied to them. It was Beaumarchais who coined the name drame for such plays. Its purpose was to describe exactly a domestic life that contained the highest morals and philosophy; to present to the

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(1) "La Mère Confidente. Act III, Scene XII.





bourgeois the touching phases of his domestic life and reach him with the new philosophy of the theater. It tended to elevate characters of mediocre or low estate to the place which lords and ladies previously occupied. Nobility had its place in this new type of drama, but was usually excluded from important rôles. The ideas, sentiments, and manners of the bourgeoisie predominated. The most humble classes of society figured therein with dignity.

La Chaussée, in his endeavor to mix comedy and tragedy, produced the "Comédie Larmoyante" (the tearful or weepy comedy) in which he portrayed every day people in their everyday occupations. He increased the emotional element of comedy and thus made it resemble more closely tragedy. He described the home life of common people - their problems of love and of wealth - especially as factors in marriage and inheritance.

The problem in "Le Préjugé à la Mode" (1735) is that of a husband who is in love with his wife yet dares not confess it because of the social prejudice against such an unusual feeling. Fashionable society, at this time, upheld the idea that a man might love every other woman except his wife. La Chaussée makes this play a plea in favor of marrying for love as opposed to the popular practice. Durval, the husband, feared the ridicule of conjugal love to such an extent that his affected indifference often appeared as scorn and insult. Yet he dared not acknowledge that he was the donator of the presents which Constance, his wife, was receiving. She loves her husband and was quite as successful in hiding the grief



which his scorn for her caused - as he at hiding his love. This conflict that existed between the husband and wife made Sophie, Constance's cousin shrink from marriage. She looked upon marriage as a relation filled with unhappiness. Damon, her lover, alone in the play is reasonable and sensible. He is instrumental in bringing Durval, his very close friend, to confess his love for his wife. And at last the one who has been very unwillingly a slave to false prejudice proclaims with vehemence:-

"Oui, je ne prétends plus que personne l' ignore;  
C'est ma femme, en un mot, c'est elle que j' adore.  
que l' on m' approuve ou non, mon bonheur me suffit.  
Peut-être mon exemple aura plus de crédit:  
On pourra m' imiter. Non il n'est pas possible  
qu' un préjugé si faux soit toujours invincible."<sup>1</sup>

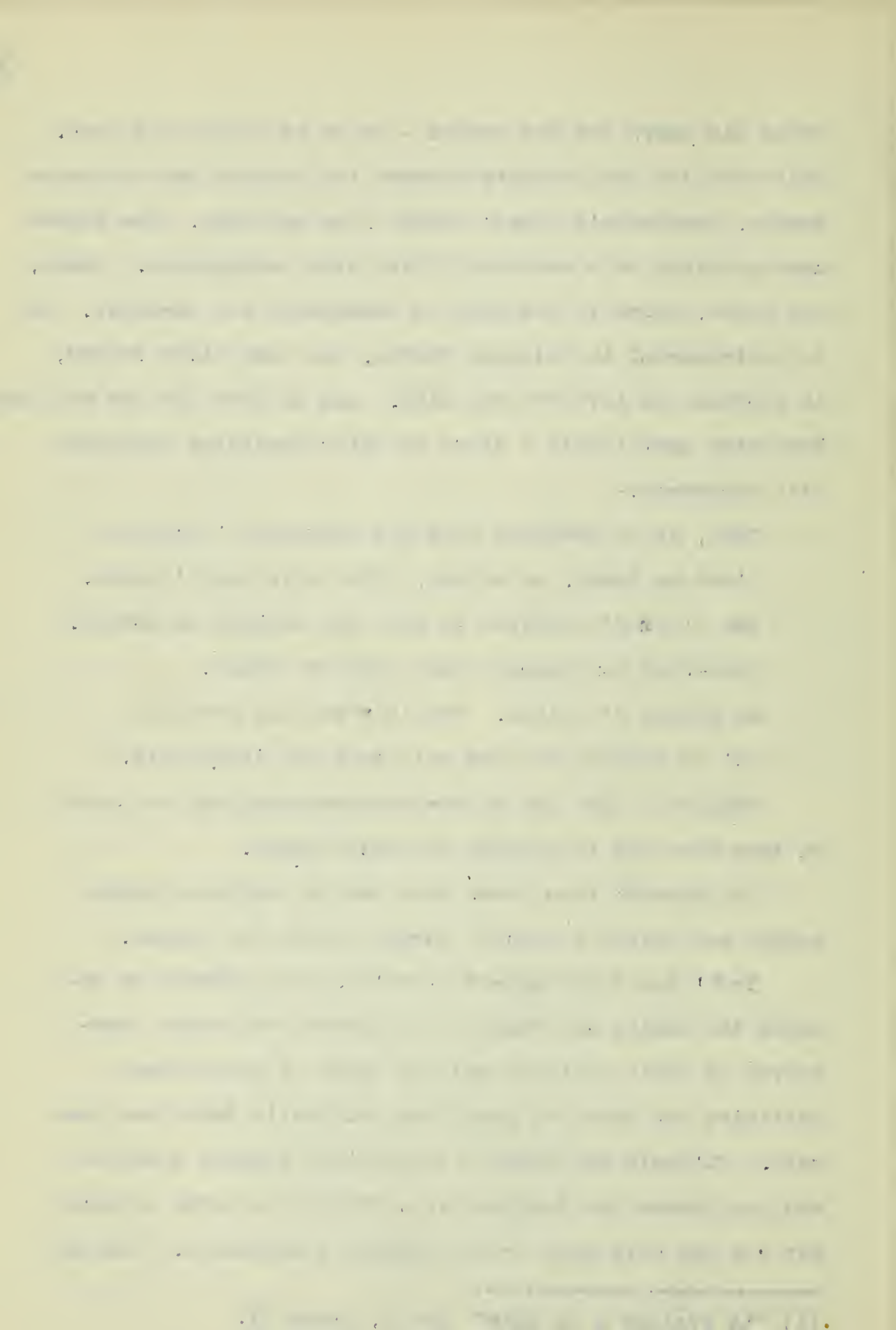
Sophie is also led to see that marriage may be based on true love and is brought to accept Damon.

La Chaussée then shows that such a prejudice cannot endure and brings his moral lesson before the people.

In "L' Ecole des Mères" et "L'Ecole des Pères" he attacks the vanity and weakness of parents who adore themselves in their children and who dream of magnificent destinies for them but make them despicable dudes and rascals. "L'Ecole des Mères" is an attack against a mother who has placed her daughter in a convent in order to make her son the sole heir to his fathers possessions. She has

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(1) "Le Préjugé à la Mode" Act V, Scene VI.





heartily favored all her son's attempts to appear aristocratic. During the absence of the father, she and her son, Le Marquis, have spent money quite extravagantly, have stationed servants in the house and Le Marquis has adopted the habit of calling his father Monsieur. The mother in her desire to appear as a member of the aristocracy ruined her son and made an egotistical fop and libertine of him. M. Argant, the father, opposes the mother's attitude. Although the author does not specify to what class he belongs, the father is distinctly bourgeois. He cannot see any reason for such extravagance, for servants, or for the 'Monsieur' with which he is greeted on his return. He has plain, common sense and a sympathetic heart, but he lacks stability in opposing the foolish ideas of his wife. He realized the injustice that is being done to his daughter. Despite this conviction, he has not enough spirit to take his daughter out of the convent without concealing her identity. She lives in her own home yet she poses as the daughter of Monsieur Argant's sister.

But Mme. Argant sees eventually that she has been deceived in the idea she had of making for her son a brilliant marriage and putting him in the elite society. She is awakened to the fact that her son has used her affections unworthily and that she has made him a good-for-nothing fop. She promptly turns to her daughter and loves her as strongly as she once hated her.



"Monsieur, voici ma fille et ma seule héritière.  
Je déshérite Argant; j' en prononce l'arrêt:  
Ma fille occupera sa place tout entière."<sup>1</sup>

And the work ends with this moral lesson:-

"En aimant ses enfants, c'est soi-même qu' on aime.  
Mais, pour jouir d'un sort parfaitement heureux,  
Il faut s'en faire aimer de même.  
Comptez qu'on ne parvient à ce bonheur suprême  
qu' en partageant son âme également entre eux."

La Chaussée's forte was in just such portrayals of every day life, as the plays mentioned above, illustrate the discordant relations between husband and wife and other problems of marriage and relationships in the home. The fact that this every day life with its joys and sorrows was considered worthy of this interest portends the approach of a social revolution. La Chaussée showed actual conditions by mixing tragedy and comedy, for every life is made up of both - no life is wholly tragic nor is any life wholly comic. He introduced the "Comédie Larmoyante" which appealed to the mass of people. To secure this end he philosophized upon social questions of the day and taught moral lessons.

This type of drama which was introduced by La Chaussée and elements of which were present in the works of Destouches and Marivaux was brought much nearer perfection by Diderot. La Chaussée lacked a leader's strength and

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(1) "L' Ecole des Mères" Act V, SceneX.





failed to advance the theories of the new drama to a very great extent. This was left for the boldness of Diderot. His is a much more important name in the development of the drame - which includes "Comédie Larmoyante", "Tragédie Bourgeoise" and "Comédie Sérieuse" - than is the name of La Chaussée. This is principally due to his part in inspiring some great works chief among which is "Le Philosophe sans le savoir of Sedaine"

"La Chaussée occupied himself with good society, great lords and bourgeois. Diderot went further; beyond the academies, the salons, the café's, the literateurs. He looked in upon the great public to which he wished to address himself. For its sake, he conceived the idea of the "Tragédie Bourgeoise" which would speak to the eyes as well as to the ears and which would reflect high moral and philanthropic lessons. This was his ideal but he did not completely attain it. He was a theorist, a philosopher, and an orator rather than a dramatic poet."<sup>1</sup> Diderot in his dramas theorized on the conditions of social life. His characters were only for the purpose of representing the circumstances which existed among the bourgeoisie. They were types rather than individuals. He wanted to bring tragedy down to contemporary reality and to utilize in it,

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(1) Lenient. "La Comédie en France" au XVIII. Siècle. Vol. I. Page 321. Ibid.



for a model, the bourgeoisie who were holding a more and more prominent place in society. He proposed also to introduce serious sentiments into comedy. The drama created according to this method was the "Tragédie Bourgeoise" or the "Comédie Sérieuse"; they differ from the "Comédie Larmoyante" in that they deal more strictly with the middle-class.

For Diderot the drame will be no more a type of literature to amuse the public, but a powerful instrument of philosophic propaganda more modern than the older tragedy and more suitable for expressing and directing the aspirations of the bourgeoisie.

"Le Fils Naturel" which was presented for the first time in 1771, but published in 1757, marks the date of the beginning of the drame bourgeois. It is an attack upon the prejudices against people of illegitimate birth.

Dorval, Le Fils Naturel, (an illegitimate son) finds himself "déclassé" on account of his birth. There is a continuous struggle in his soul in which virtue is ever trying to overcome this prejudice - to lift him out of this chaos. He suddenly realizes that he is in love with Rosalie, the sweetheart of his best friend, Clairville, and that she is in love with him. He charges himself with all the unhappiness that has come to his friend and virtuously plans to renounce his love for her and to leave his fortune to Rosalie and Clairville.

But Constance has flattered herself by believing she is loved by Dorval whose virtues she admires very much.





She finds an unfinished letter which Dorval has intended for Rosalie but she assumes that it was destined for her and thereby is thoroughly convinced of his love for her. Dorval wishes to annihilate the love she cherishes for him and to this end he tells her the story of his unfortunate life. All that remains in him is virtue. He finally tells her of his illegitimate birth and of his fortune which has been reduced by half. But all these reasons do not daunt Constance who sees only Dorval and his virtues. She does not condemn him on account of his birth and belittles fortune and wealth as unworthy of one's best self:- "La naissance nous est donnée; mais nos vertus sont à nous. Pour ces richesses, toujours embarrassantes et souvent dangereuses, le ciel, en les repandant indifferemment sur la surface de la terre, et les faisant tomber sans distinction sur le bon et sur le méchant, dicte lui-même le jugement qu' on doit porter, naissance, dignités, fortune, grandeurs, le méchant peut tout avoir, excepte la faveur du ciel."<sup>1</sup> Dorval's virtues finally overcome his misfortunes. He declares that virtue and conscience are the sole basis for happiness; and he tells how he has won the most difficult victory over himself.

"Mais mon malheur a cessé au moment où j'ai commencé d'être juste. J'ai remporté sur moi la victoire la plus difficile, mais la plus entière. Je suis rentré dans mon caractère.

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(L) "Le Fils Naturel" Act IV, Scene III.



Dorval and Rosalie find that they are brother and sister and Clairville marries Rosalie. Dorval becomes the husband of Constance.

This play is very unnatural. Diderot has upheld his idea of sacrificing characters in order to portray conditions. The fact that Rosalie and Dorval can forget their love for one another as soon as they discover that they are brother and sister does not seem at all true to life nor does Constance in her exceptional knowledge of ethics and philosophy. Diderot brings out his own philosophy through her. The liberal ideas concerning the justice that should be given an illegitimate child was a daring philosophy to try to stage for the public. But the public accepted it as is seen by the following quotation from Freron's "L'annee Litteraire" (1757).

"Je ne puis vous exprimer avec quelle chaleur le public a reçu "Le Fils Naturel". Qu' il vous suffise de savoir que ce drame a fait quelque temps le sujet de toutes les lectures, de toutes les conversations et de presque tous les éloges de Paris". It was not published, however, until 1771. The fact that "Le Fils Naturel" was so favorably accepted is proof that the struggle to reach the people with new philosophical ideas which was in process in the Eighteenth Century was gaining ground.

A few years before (1761) "Le Père de Famille" was presented. It is considered one of Diderot's greater works





and it contains just as forceful a philosophy - an attack against the prejudices of rank and fortune. It was very much discussed and read but it was played little in France. Opposition to such literature was ever present. But it was welcomed in foreign countries and with especial enthusiasm in Germany. It was presented ten years before "Le Fils Naturel" but was written one year later.

Saint-Albin, the son of Le Pere de Famille, loves a poor, working girl and is determined to break away from the prejudice against marrying below ones rank, and defiant of the result will marry her. He plays the role of an impoverished young man in order to win her heart.

Saint-Albin's father is very devoted to him and the son is worthy of this love. All would have gone well with them but for this prejudice which is so firmly grounded in society; for it meant the break between father and son. The father could not conscientiously withstand the social opposition to such marriages and could not consent to the marriage of Saint-Albin to Sophie.

Le Père - "Oui, je l'ai vue; elle est belle, et je la crois sage mais, qu' en prétendez - vous faire? un amusement? Je ne le souffrirais pas. Votre femme? Elle ne vous convient pas."

St.-Albin - "Elle est belle, elle est sage, et elle ne me convient pas! Quelle est donc la femme qui me convient?"

Le Pere - "Celle qui, par son éducation sa naissance,



son état et sa fortune, puit assurer votre bonheur et satisfaire  
a mes esperances."

St. Albin - "Ainsi le mariage sera pour moi un bien d'intérêt et d'ambition! Mon père, vous n'avez qu' un fils; ne le sacrifier pas à des vues qui remplissent le monde d' époux malheureux."1

St. Albin reminds the father that his mother was also a poor girl and the father replies:-

"J'avais des ressources, et votre mère avait de la naissance."

Finally Le Père de Famille orders St. Albin by all the authority that a father has over his children not to marry Sophie. St. Albin replies:-

"Voilà comme ils (parents) sont tous. C'est ainsi qu' ils nous aiment. S'ils étaient nos ennemis, que feraient - ils de plus?

St. Albin knows also that he is sacrificing the inheritance of his uncle by marrying Sophie, but is perfectly willing to do so. The uncle, Le Commandeur holds firmly to the old prejudice and stands out in contrast with Le Père de Famille who, although he cannot see his sons point of view at first, is really quite tolerant and liberal minded.

Ultimately it is discovered that Sophie is the niece of Le Commandeur who has turned her away from his home when she came there without money or anyone to care for her. So she is really of noble blood, but it is not felt that

(1) "Le Pere de Famille". Act II, Scene VI.





this fact has helped the Pere de Famille in bringing himself to favor the marriage of his son to Sophie. He also sanctions the marriage of his daughter with Germeuil, a man without fortune. In the last scene of the play he calls Sophie and Saint-Albin, and Germeuil and Cecile to receive his benediction. Then he says:- "Oh! qu' il est cruel --- qu' il est doux d' etre un père!"

Besides this philosophical argument against the stubborn opposition to marrying below one's rank, Diderot makes a pass at the ease with which "Les lettres de cachet" are secured.

Le Commandeur:- "Mais j' ai fait une bevue. Le nom de cette Clairret eut été fort bien sur ma lettre de cachet, et il n'en aurait pas couté davantage."<sup>1</sup> These thrusts at the ease of securing "Lettre de cachet" were omitted in the performance.

The fact that plays like Diderot's "Le Fils Naturel" and "Le Père de Famille" succeeded on the stage and that the public was moved to tears by the presentation of conditions which were so closely related to them shows their sympathy with the new philosophical movement and their desire for change in social conditions.

Diderot, who advanced exceedingly logical and influential theories for the development of the drame, did not write the best drama of the "genre". In fact, the two plays discussed here, are weak because of their unnatural development of dramatic action and characters. The dialogue is too stilted and preachy yet these are considered his best and most interesting

(1) "Le Père de Famille" Act V, Scene VIII.



plays.

Sedaine's "Philosophe sans le Savoir" is recognized as the best drame. It represents an oasis in a desert of mediocrity.<sup>1</sup>

In portraying the conditions of life that he wanted to put before the public, Sedaine did not use undue exaggerations nor unnatural rôles. His characters spoke in their every day language and developed according to an ordinary course in life. This was not true of the characters of Diderot. This naturalness added much to the reality of the play as a dramatic production and made the spectator feel that he was witnessing something not so remote from himself. Sedaine showed great ability in developing logical, dramatic action. He made his play for the stage not merely for the study.

The fact that M. Vanderk père, even though he was opposed to the principle of duelling, was brought to the point where he could conscientiously do nothing but sanction the duel which his son was to fight is evidence of this logic.

M. Vanderk père to his son:- "Je suis bien loin de vous détourner de ce que vous avez à faire. (Douloureusement) Vous êtes militaire, et quand on a pris un engagement vis-a-vis du public, ou doit le tenir, quoiqu' il en coûte à la raison, et même a la nature."<sup>1</sup>

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(1) "Le Philosophe sans le Savoir" Act III, Scene VIII.





Later he gives his reason for speaking thus to his son. In answer to the servant who asks M. Vanderk if he is not able to adjust the affair, he responds:-

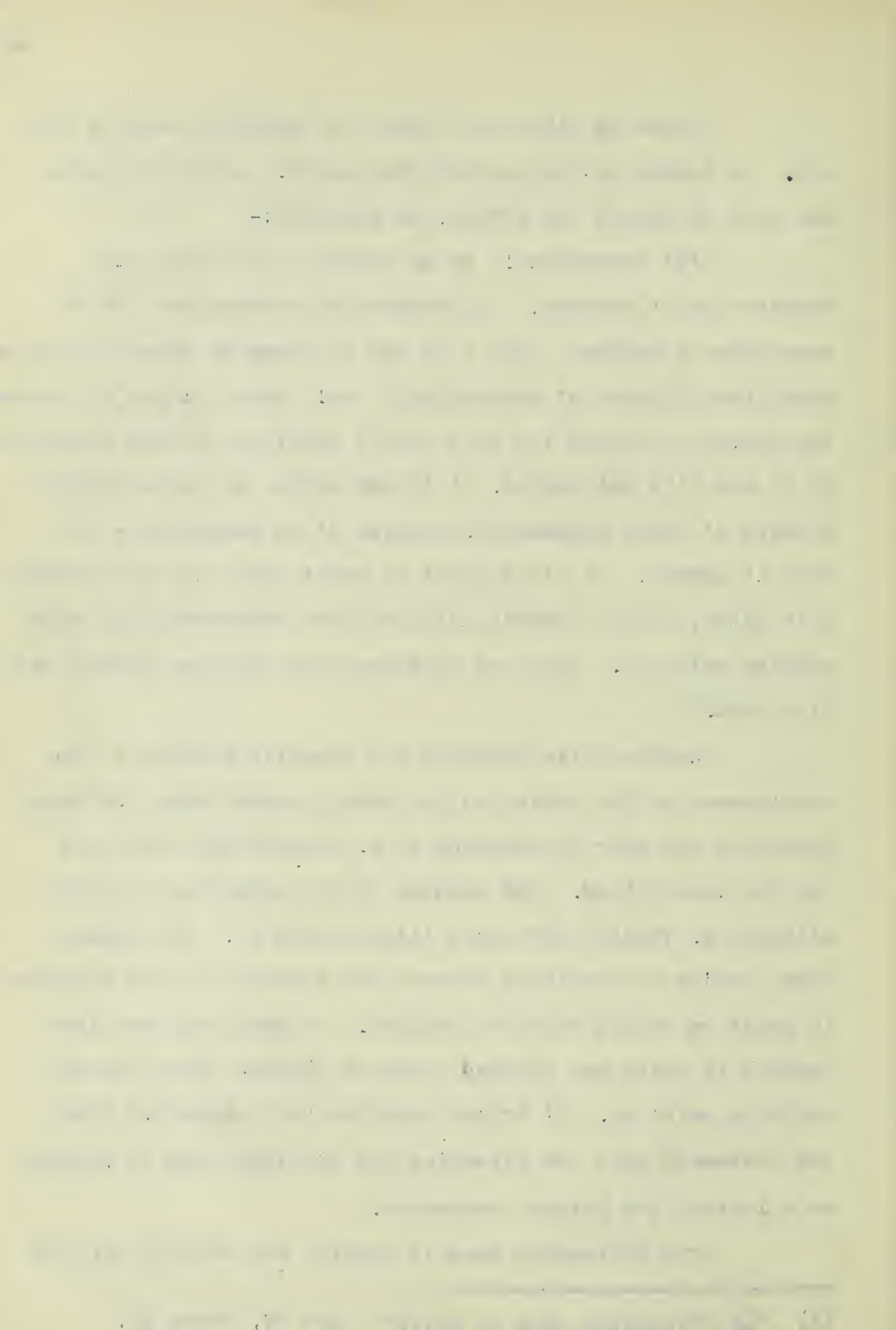
"L' accommoder! Tu ne connais pas toutes les entraves de l' honneur: ou trouver son adversaire? Où le rencontrer à présent? Est - ce sur le champ de bataille que de pareilles affaires s' accommodent? He! n'est il pas et contre les mœurs et contre les lois que je paraisse en être instruit? Et si mon fils eut hésité, s' il eut molli, si cette cruelle affaire s' était accommodée, combien s' en préparait - il dans l' avenir: Il n'est point de petit homme qui ne cherchât à le tâter; il lui faudrait dix affaires heureuses pour faire oublier celle-ci. Elle est affreuse dans tous ses points; car il a tort."<sup>1</sup>

Sedaine also displays his dramatic ability in the development of the action to the tragic scene where the three knocks on the door to announce to M. Vanderk père that his son has been killed. The tragedy of the situation is felt although M. Vanderk père says little about it. He refrains from showing his feelings because the marriage of his daughter is going on in his home at the time. It does not seem that Sedaine is using any studied "Coup de Theatre" when the son suddenly walks in. It brings surprise and relaxation from the tenseness that the situation has developed but it follows as a logical and natural occurrence.

"Le Philosophe sans le Savoir" was written for the

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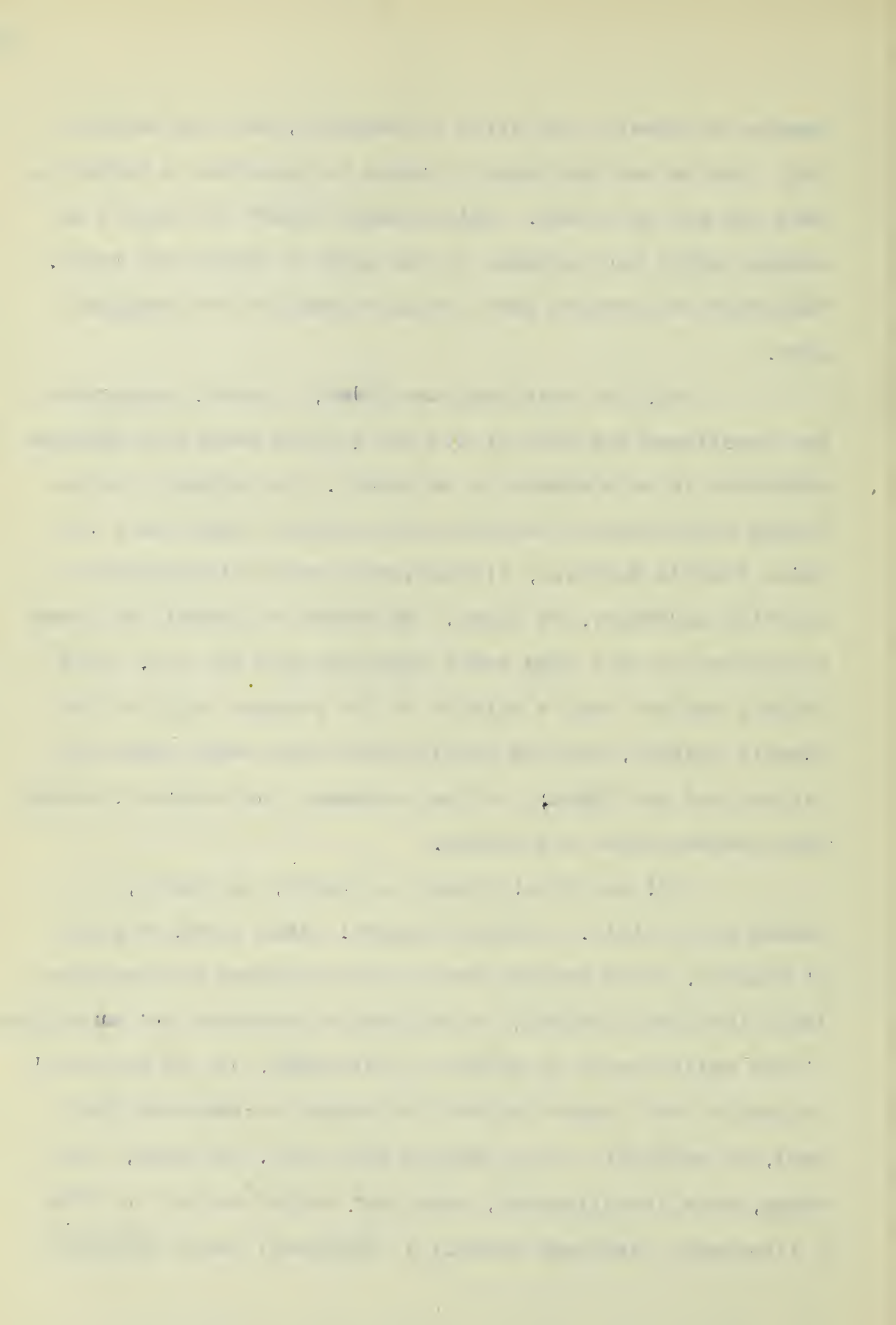
(1) "Le Philosophe sans le Savoir" Act IV, Scene IX.



purpose of showing the evils of duelling, but the censors felt that he was upholding it since he permitted a father to send his son to a duel. This brought before the public an example which was contrary to the laws of church and state. Therefore the censors made him alter much of the original play.

But, the fact that the father, a noble, democratic man sanctioned the duel of his son did not mean that Sedaine advocated it as a custom to be upheld. He pictured the existing conditions to show that even though there was a law which forbade duelling, circumstances made this barbarous practice necessary, at times. He wanted to school the ideas of society so that they would coincide with the law. This father, who had been a soldier in his younger days and had himself duelled, saw the difficulties that would ensue if his son did not fight; but he condemned the state of society which necessitated the custom.

"Ah! mon fils! fouler aux pieds, la raison, la nature et les lois. Préjugé funeste! Abus cruel du point d' honneur, tu ne pouvais avoir pris naissance que dans les temps les plus barbares; tu ne pouvais subsister qu' au milieu d' une nation vaine et pleine d' elle-même, qu' au milieu d' un peuple dont chaque particulier compte sa personne pour tout, et sa patrie et sa famille pour rien. Et vous, lois sages, mais insuffisantes, vous avez désiré mettre un frein à l'honneur; vous avez ennobli l' échafaud; votre sévérité





\ à servi à froisser le cœur d'un honnête homme entre l'infamie et le supplice." Sedaine still further shows the absurdity of the duel by making M. Vanderk fils and his adversary come to an understanding and embrace each other instead of fighting.

Another question which Sedaine raises together with the more extended treatment of duelling is the prejudice of birth which had been discussed so much throughout the Eighteenth Century. M. Vanderk père, a noble, on account of an unfortunate duel and the loss of his fortune, was forced to leave his country.

But he overcame the detriment which resulted from this misfortune, and was not at all ashamed to occupy the place of a merchant. In contrast with M. Vanderk père who was democratic and considerate in his duties as a husband, a father and a master, his sister La Marquise upheld the old prejudice of birth. She came to visit her brother but only as a very distant relative of his for she would be disgraced if she were recognized as the sister of a merchant.

M. Vanderk père:- "---- et lorsque mes dons ne profanent pas ses mains, le nom de frère profanerait ses leures; elle est cependant la meilleure de toutes les femmes; mais voilà comme un honneur de préjugé étouffe les sentiments de la nature et de la reconnaissance."

This play was at first called "Le Duel" but the censors objected to this so Sedaine gave it the title of



"Le Philosophe sans le Savoir".

"D'abord, son titre primitif, "Le Duel" avait effarouché la police. Sedaine offrit d' y substituer celui du "Philosophe sans le Savoir."<sup>1</sup>

M. Vanderk père is this philosopher. He unconsciously practices his philosophy but does not preach it. Sedaine sketches a man whose philosophy is opposed to the attitude taken by many people of his century, who pretend to have a title without having one and who try to appear wise and virtuous by affecting haughty pride and arrogance.

"Le Philosophe sans le Savoir" is considered by most critics to occupy first place among the dramas. It is also considered an important forerunner of modern realistic drama.

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A new theater which would serve as an agent for the propogation of moral and social reform and would reproduce living characters from all ranks of life was gradually developing throughout the Eighteenth Century. This grew more and more as the time of the Revolution approached. Men of letters gained, by degrees, a social prestige which they had not had in the Seventeenth Century and became the respected directors of public thought. There had never been such an intense interest, by all classes of society, in the

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(1) Lenient. "La Comedie en France" Au XVIII. Siècle. Volume II. Page 123. Ibid.





theater. And plays were allowed on the stage which would never have been dreamed of in the preceding century; writers dared to ridicule all social prejudices. The climax is reached with Beaumarchais.

His first two plays, "Eugénie", presented for the first time in 1767, and "Les Deux Amis" in 1770 belong to the class of drame. Although the pathetic serious style seemed contrary to his theories, Beaumarchais had a passion for innovations; and since this new type of drama coincided with his ideas in being a form of literature which ridiculed social prejudices and the abuses of the nobility, and since it opposed the aristocratic tragedy he adopted it. His conceptions of the new type of drama were much the same as those of Diderot. But Beaumarchais showed a superiority to Diderot, especially in dialogue. The conversation in "Eugénie" is much more vivacious and natural than that in "Le Fils Naturel" or "Le Père de Famille". "Les Deux Amis" also maintains this superiority. If anything the dialogue is more vigorous and the dramatic action more rapid and clear cut than that of "Eugénie". Long, drawn-out speeches were a drawback to the plays of Diderot. The men and women in Beaumarchais' plays approach no nearer living characters than do those presented by Diderot but his intrigue is much better worked out.

Beaumarchais felt the responsibility of attacking the vices of his century and did this successfully. In his introduction to "Le Mariage de Figaro" he gives an insight



into his method of making the public see what social vices surround it. He says that it is not right to exclude characters from a play because they appear with vicious customs; the proper means of moralizing is to reveal these vices - to show the people what they are. "It is not the vice nor the incident which it brings that makes an indecent theater, but the defect of the lesson and morality."<sup>1</sup>

"Eugénie" is the first play put on the stage by Beaumarchais. The subject is that of a virtuous girl seduced and abandoned by a rich noble. It offers a severe moral lesson to libertines like the Count Clarendon by showing the suffering and sorrow their actions bring to the world. Eugénie, without the knowledge of her father, believes that she has married the Count. But the marriage was a counterfeit. Count Clarendon had disguised one of his servants as a priest and this pseudo-priest performed the ceremony. Eugénie thinks for a time that he is her husband but finally discovers his trickery. She learns that he is to marry a rich heiress. Beaumarchais has made a very powerful scene in telling this discovery and Eugénie's confession, of her marriage, to her father. Her father, Le Baron Hartley, is a kind father who loves his daughter and means to do all in his power for her happiness; but he is short-sighted in seeing wherein her happiness lies.

Beaumarchais in depicting this character tried

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(1) Beaumarchais' Preface to "Le Mariage de Figaro".





to instruct fathers in their duty toward their children. He showed that this father had failed to instill the highest ideals in his daughter. Le Baron Hartley entrusted the care of his daughter to her aunt whose ambition for a great name and rank dazzles her so that she fails to see real values in life. And she fails to teach the daughter any other ambition. The title of the Count means everything to Mme. Murer, the aunt, but Le Baron Hartley sees that he is a worthless libertine. In defending him Mme. Murer says that he is a man full of honor and Le Baron responds:-

"Avec les hommes, et scelerat avec les femmes:

Voilà le mot. Mais votre sexe a toujours eu dans le coeur un sentiment secret de preference pour les gens de ce caractère."<sup>1</sup>

The characters are all unnatural. Nothing could be more unnatural than the count's change; he disregarded every moral law in order to indulge his sensuality, but suddenly he sees the noble sentiments of life and finds happiness and peace with Eugénie whom he had so unscrupulously betrayed.

The public was overwhelmed by the fact that Beaumarchais dared to present such a theme on the stage, but in spite of their protests the play has been judged, if not the best, at least the most moral of the dramas.

"The value of the play comes from the courage of the author who dared to carry social inequality to the acme of liberty"<sup>2</sup>

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(1) "Eugénie". Act III, Scene VI.

(2) Beaumarchais' Preface to "Le Mariage de Figaro".

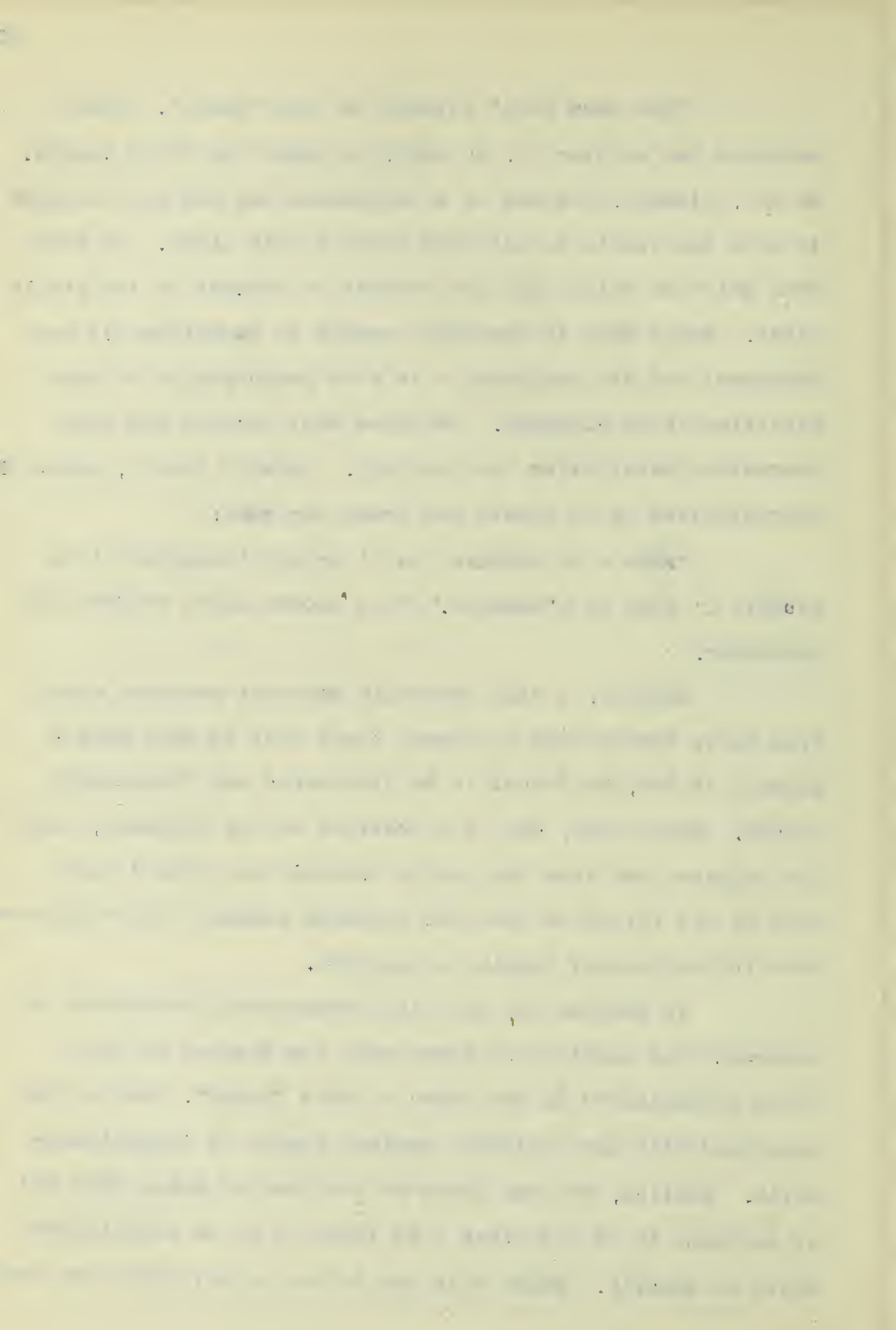


"Les Deux Amis" belongs to this "genre". Beaumarchais has written it, he says, to honor the third estate. He was, himself, the son of a watchmaker and did not hesitate to move the public to pity for those of his class. In "Les Deux Amis" he points out the virtues of friends of the middle class. Melac Père is unselfish enough to sacrifice his own happiness and his own honor - to risk bankruptcy - to save his friend from disgrace. He shows what upright and true characters exist below the nobility. Aurelly (Act V, Scene XI) characterized as an honest and frank man says:-

"Reux - tu comparer de l' argent lorsqu'il l' en coutait l' état et l'honneur." This speech makes evident his character.

Aurelly, a rich wholesale merchant awaiting money from Paris (which does not come) finds that he must make a payment of 600,000 francs or be dishonored and financially ruined. Melac Père, who is a receiver of the finances, takes the required sum from the public treasury and puts it into that of his friend so that the required payment can be made -- thus laying himself liable to disgrace.

In working out his plot Beaumarchais endeavored to associate the question of money with the element of pity which predominated in the drama of this "genre". He is also concerned with the prejudice against people of illegitimate birth. Pauline, who has lived at the home of Melac Père and is supposed to be his niece - is found to be an illegitimate child of Aurelly. Melac fils has fallen in love with her and





is willing to marry her even after he learns of her disgraceful standing before society. He condemns the prejudice which denies any virtue to those of this class.

Melac fils:- "La faute de leurs parents leur ôte-t-elle une qualité, une seule vertu? Au contraire, Pauline, et vous en êtes la preuve; il semble que la nature se plaise à les dé - dommager de nos cruels préjugés par un mérite plus essentiel."

Pauline:- "Ce préjugé n' en est pas moins respectable."

Melac fils:- "Il est injuste, et je mettrai ma gloire à le fouler aux pieds."<sup>1</sup>

If Beaumarchais had written nothing but these "Comédie ~~serieuse~~" he would have fallen far short of the renown that is now his. But he has shown himself a worthy advocate of justice; a power in bringing about social equality.

With "Le Barbier de Séville" Beaumarchais brought pure comedy into vogue again. It was modeled after that of Molière and Regnard but contained much more trickery and foolish gaiety than did the comedies of his predecessors. It also contained a much nobler purpose in that it strongly advocated equality among the different classes.

The plot of "Le Barbier de Seville" is one which has been used a great deal - that of a guardian who wishes to marry his ward, much to her disgust, because she loves Le Comte Almaviva who comes to sing under her window. Figaro, the noted character created by Beaumarchais, is the central  
(1) Les Deux Amis" Act IV, Scene X.

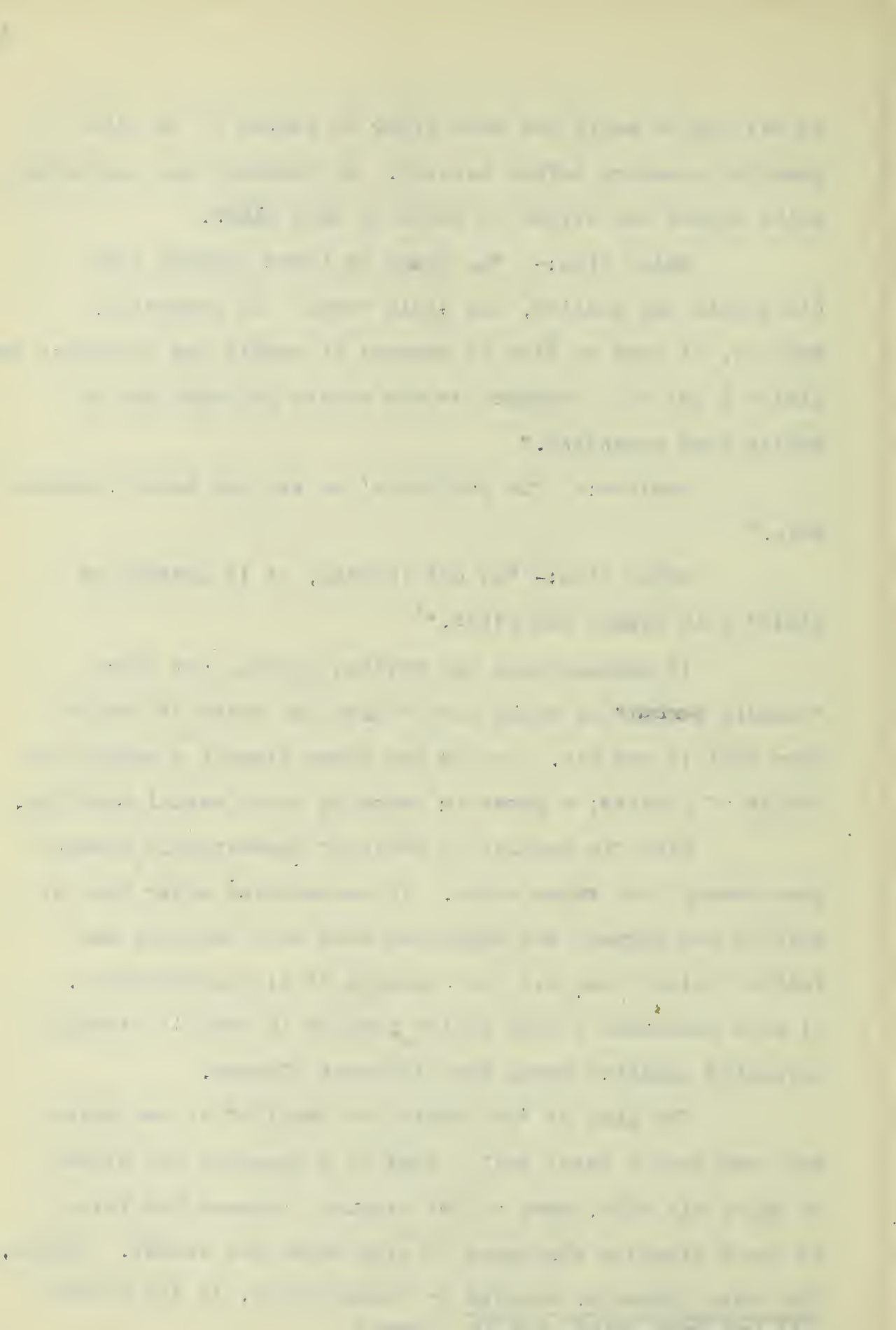


figure in all the intrigues worked so that the Count may succeed in seeing Rosine who is so closely watched by her guardian. Figaro who is supposed to represent the author himself, is a representative of the bourgeoisie, and even of the laboring class. He is placed in opposition to the Count who represents the nobility. It is his cleverness that sustains the plots of the two plays, "Le Barbier de Séville" and "Le Mariage de Figaro". He figures first in "Le Barbier de Séville" in all the effervescence of youth. His wit all through the comedy, although he is only a servant "declassé" because of his unknown heritage, overshadows that of the Count. His misfortunes have taught him to take life as it comes without a worry.

"Je me presse de rire de tout, de peur d' être obligé d' en pleurer."<sup>1</sup>

It is not through any intelligence on the part of the Count that he finally wins Rosine. It is Figaro who does the planning and who is responsible for outwitting the guardian, Bartholo. Bartholo, in opposition to Figaro's progressiveness is a stand-patter for the old order of society. His unreasonable intolerance allows Rosine no individuality whatever - no choice in what she does. The century in which he is living is breaking away from this idea - sons and daughters are gaining the right to have a

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(1) "Le Barbier de Séville" Act I. Scene II.





voice in the choice of their life mates. This tendency is shown in its successive stages of development in "Le Parisienne" by Dancourt, "Le Jeu de l' Amour et du Hasard" and "La Mere Confidente" by Marivaux, and "Le Fils Naturel" by Diderot. In this play Rosine - try as her master may - is guided by her own will - not his.

The chief merit of "Le Barbier de Séville " lies in its skilful intrigue and its comic element, as well as its importance as a prelude to the "Mariage de Figaro" which so effectively influenced the social change, the dominant movement of the time which culminated in the Revolution.

It is said that the duel between Figaro and Le Comte Almaviva in "Le Mariage de Figaro" became a duel of the third estate with the privileged orders; and only after much effort was it finally presented. This presentation caused much discussion and considerable upheaval among the different classes and is thought to be one of the immediate causes of the Revolution or at least a reflex of those causes.

Beaumarchais used some of the skill and cleverness that he displays in Figaro in gaining the right to present his play on the stage. It was necessary for him to overcome three resisting powers; the king, the keeper of the seals and the academic censor. Figaro, since he was an advocate of the bourgeoisie, gained for him their aid. Beaumarchais also had in his support the queen and her ladies of honor - so after much persistence and after suppression of parts of the play he was permitted to present it. Once on the



stage it was a great success; and this success was due to the gaiety with which was commingled delicate moral reflections; and to the atmosphere of reform and revolution which was of such great popular interest.

Figaro - Le Comte Almaviva - Rosine (La Comtesse) and Bartholo, who were prominent in the Barbier de Séville, figure in this also. Figaro, instead of working out wild intrigues to aid Le Comte Almaviva or Rosine, is now scheming for his own defense; to defend Suzanne, a maid of the Comtesse and fiancée of Figaro, against the Count. Almaviva has grown tired of Rosine, La Comtesse, and has become a rival of Figaro for Suzanne. In this contest Almaviva has in his favor the prestige of wealth and name, which were two of the most influential assets at that time. Figaro has only his pluck, his trickery, his invincible gaiety and his philosophy. Beaumarchais does not hesitate to strike at the injustices of society through Figaro. In a famous monologue of Figaro's we find many such thrusts; first at the fact that rank buys so much for the nobility. --

"Parce que vous êtes un grand seigneur, vous vous croyez un grand genie! - noblesse, fortune, un rang, des places: tout cela rend si fier! Qu'avez-vous fait pour tant de biens? vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, et rien de plus;"<sup>1</sup> then against political proceedings -

Que je voudrais bien tenir un de ces puissans de

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(1) "Mariage de Figaro" Act V. Scene III.





quatre jours, si légers sur le mal qu' ils ordonnent, quand une bonne disgrâce a cuvé son orgueil: je lui dirois --- que les sottises imprimées n'ont d'importance qu' aux lieux ou l' on en gêne le cours; que sans la liberté de blâmer il n'est point d' éloge flatteur, et qu' il n'y a que les petits hommes qui redoutent les petits écrits;"<sup>1</sup> and against the freedom of the press -

"et, que, pourvu que je ne parle en mes écrits ni de l' autorité, ni du culte, ni de la politique, ni de la morale, ni des gens en place, ni des corps en credit, ni de l'O péra ni des autre spectacles, ni de personne qui tienne a quelque chose je puis tout imprimer librement, sous l' inspection de deux ou trois censeurs;"<sup>2</sup> against the social forces which hindered one from making his own living -

"Je commençois même à comprendre que pour gagner du bien le savoir - faire vaut mieux que le savoir. Mais comme chacun pilloît autour de moi en exigeant que je fusse honnête, il fallut bien périr encore."<sup>2</sup>

All through this soliloquy Figaro, in lamenting the fate that has been his, is expressing "Le Mal du Siècle" which prevailed during the Eighteenth Century.

"Pourquoi ces choses, et non pas d' autres? qui les a fixées sur ma tête? Forcé de parcourir la route où je suis entre sans le savoir comme j' en sortirai sans le

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(1) "Mariage de Figaro" Act V, Scene III.

(2) "Mariage de Figaro" Act V, Scene III.



vouloir, je l'ai jondrée d' autant de fleurs que ma gaieté, sans savoir si elle est à moi plus que le reste, ni même quel est ce moi dont je m' occupe."<sup>1</sup>

Beaumarchais, in developing the characters of "Le Barbier de Séville" in "Le Mariage de Figaro", has Figaro, the valet, who represents the third estate, gain power and prestige and Almaviva, the count and representative of the noble class, is debased and made a common dupe. This makes clear that the lower class is gaining power and prestige at the expense of the nobility. Beaumarchais is the sponsor of the bourgeoisie and contrasts them favorably with the nobles.

Beaumarchais was the last important writer of comedies before the Revolution. He is generally credited as being a powerful factor in the inception of the French Revolution. His revolutionary comedies expressed the thoughts of the lower classes and their presentation crystalized resentment against the nobles.

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The gradual evolution of the social order, which culminated in the Revolution, can be traced in French Comedy through the Eighteenth Century. It reflects a crescendo condemnation of the abused authority of the nobility and a steady destruction of the barrier that separated the lower classes from higher social privileges. It was an age unprincipled in its greed for money, its politics, its morals and its marriage and domestic relationships. But it was also

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(1) "Mariage de Figaro" Act V, Scene III.





a time when educated men began to examine critically contemporary conditions with the purpose of effecting reform.

Regnard and Dancourt did not write in order to bring about a social change; they merely depicted conditions as they existed. But La Chaussée was the first to portend the approaching Revolution. He gave the bourgeoisie a prominent place in his *Comédie Larmoyante* and advanced the theory that their life contained virtues which were worthy of development. That they were considered capable of filling the leading roles in literature is proof that they were gaining a more important place in French life. Diderot and Sedaine in their attacks against injurious customs furthered the portrayal of the bourgeoisie. Diderot, moreover, represented characters and conditions of a still lower degree, on the stage. But it was Beaumarchais who felt more than any of his predecessors the need of a radical reform. He boldly expressed the sentiments of the lower classes in *"Le Mariage de Figaro"* in such a way that it gave them courage to rise up in arms against the authority which was suppressing them.

Eighteenth Century French comedy mirrors contemporary French life; it reflects all its changes, good and bad, and it serves, for that reason, as a perfect index of the social state. Yet it is more than the passive mirror; for it has more power than the power to reflect. It possesses the ability to inspire. Perhaps as the looking glass inspires beauty to adjust and evolve its beauty so the looking glass of French comedy infused, in the ambitious, restless mind of the French, the desire to



improve their lot, to evolve to social equality. And as the mirror often drops far behind the imagination in beauty's case, here too, imagination grew impatient with a lagging mirror and plunged France into Revolution.





**I Regnard**

Le Joueur

Les Folies Amoureuses

Le Légataire Universel

Le Bal

Le Distrait

Le Retour Imprevu

Les Ménéchmes

L'Homme à Bonnes Fortunes

La Naissance d'Amadis

Le Divorce

La Critique de l'Homme à Bonnes Fortunes

Les Vendanges

**II Dancourt**

Les Trois Cousines

Le Gallant Jardinier

Le Chevalier à la Mode

Le Mari Retrouvé

Les Bourgeoises de qualité

La Femme d'Intrigues

La Maison de Campagne

L'Été des Coquettes

La Parisienne

Le Retour des Officiers



## II Dancourt (continued)

Le Charivari

Le Tuteur

Les Vendanges de Suresne

L'Impromptu de Garnison

Colin-Maillard

Le Moulin de Javelle

Les Curieux de Compiègne

Les Vacances

Le Prix d l' Arquebuse

## III Destouches

Le Philosophe Marié

L'Envieux

Le Glorieux

Les Philosophes Amoureux

L'Enfant Gâté

## IV Marivaux

La Mère Confidente

L'Ecole des Mères

Le Préjugé Vaincu

## V La Chaussée

Le Préjugé à la Mode

L'Ecole des Mères

CHAPTER I

OF THE

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CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

THE HISTORY OF THE

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THE HISTORY OF THE

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CHAPTER XVIII



## VI Diderot

Le Fils Naturel  
 \  
 Le Père de Famille

## VII Sedaine

Le Philosophe sans le Savoir

## VIII Beaumarchais

Eugénie  
 Les Deux Amis  
 Le Barbier de Séville  
 Le Mariage de Figaro

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